

# DEFINING BRANDED CONTENT FOR THE DIGITAL AGE

The Industry Experts' Views on Branded Content as a  
new Marketing Communications Concept

**FOREWORD BY ANDREW CANTER**

GLOBAL CEO, BCMA

**A Collaborative Research  
Project Commissioned  
by the Branded Content  
Marketing Association  
(BCMA) and Conducted by:**

**Bjoern Asmussen &  
Serena Wider**

Brand Strategy Research Group,  
Oxford Brookes University  
Business School

**Ross Williams, Neil Stevenson  
& Elliot Whitehead**

Ipsos MORI  
London



**OXFORD  
BROOKES  
UNIVERSITY**



**Ipsos Connect**

# Foreword

**As the pre-eminent global association for branded content, the Branded Content Marketing Association (BCMA) is fully committed to commissioning research to understand the current and future challenges for brands.**

The research is equally as useful and relevant for those brands already using content as it is for those brands thinking about using content as a key element of their marketing strategy. We firmly believe that as a result of this academic work the future direction of the branded content industry will become a whole lot clearer. This will ultimately benefit everyone that is involved with the ‘wonderful world of branded content’.

With little academic work undertaken in branded content, we felt it was critical for the BCMA to lead the industry in order to develop a clearer understanding of this new important marketing concept and define branded content for the digital age. We realise that defining branded content is a real challenge and is the topic of much discussion and debate around the globe. We believe it is crucial to continue our important work in this area for the benefit of our members and branded content practitioners alike.

By taking a collaborative approach in bringing together academia and industry we have uncovered some fascinating and practical insights from leading practitioners in the branded content industry.

We’re convinced that these insights will lead to more effective branded content campaigns.

**Andrew Canter** | Global CEO, BCMA

For more information about the BCMA, please visit [www.thebcma.info](http://www.thebcma.info)

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The background of the entire page is a dense field of three-dimensional cubes. The cubes are a deep red color and are scattered across a matching red surface. They are arranged in a way that creates a sense of depth and perspective, with some cubes appearing closer and larger, while others are further away and smaller. The lighting is soft, casting gentle shadows from the cubes onto the surface.

**DEFINING BRANDED  
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# **INTRODUCTION**

**Over the last few years, the interest in the concept of branded content has grown exponentially. However, to date, little empirical research has been conducted to clarify what this marketing concept actually means.**

The varied nature of the concept in terms of strategy, creation and distribution has led to many different and often conflicting views on what branded content is and how best to define it. This is a crucial issue because a foggy understanding of branded content can feed into haphazard executions, misaligned aims and outcomes, or an ignorance of crucial questions around distribution and campaign planning.

This research project therefore has two main purposes:

- to develop a clearer and deeper understanding of what branded content can mean from a marketing communications industry perspective, and
- to provide guidance on how to use the term branded content in the future

The first phase of this study was conducted in 2013/14 and focused on a literature review of practitioner and academic publications. This review identified that people talk about branded content in up to five different ways, categorised as follows:

1. The Traditional TMO (Trademark Owner) perspective

2. The Digital TMO perspective

3. The Integrated TMO perspective

4. The Stakeholder perspective

5. The All-Encompassing perspective

Based on these initial findings, the second phase of the study in 2015/16 has focused on an empirical in-depth investigation of how industry experts conceptualise the term 'branded content'. We conducted telephone interviews with thirty leading experts (in the following identified as E01 to E30) from a variety of areas in the marketing industry. The average length of the interviews was 40 minutes. The shortest interview length was 28 minutes and the longest 79 minutes.

This report highlights the key themes which have emerged from these interviews. Furthermore, the report proposes two definitions of the term branded content based on these findings. It concludes with recommendations for the marketing industry to help organisations harness the power of branded content as a marketing communications concept. ●



An aerial photograph of a dry, cracked landscape. A large, dark 'X' is marked on the ground, formed by two intersecting lines. The ground is a mix of light and dark patches, suggesting different soil types or perhaps dried mud. The overall tone is greenish-grey.

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# THE POINT OF DEPARTURE

Confusion about the term branded content

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**In general, there appears to be a lack of clarity around what the term branded content means (E06, E16, E20, E25). While some of the 30 marketing communications experts who were interviewed are not interested in the current conceptualisations of the term branded content at all – such as E01: “I don’t care about definitions at all” – others express their general concerns about existing conceptualisations of the term branded content (E02, E06, E13, E20, E21, E22, E24, E27, E28, E29).**

“I have a problem with the phrase branded content because it’s too broad” (E27).

Particularly the word ‘content’ seems to lack clarity in a marketing context:

“If you say ‘content’ it can mean anything. Sometimes when people come out with words you say, ‘OK. Tell me something that’s not content in the marketing space?’” (E21)

“The word content is a terrible word because it can mean anything.” (E13)

“... content is a very vague word” (E24)

Branded content can also mean different things in different contexts (E02, E06, E16). Therefore, it is no surprise that, when it comes to clarifying what branded content is, “the line is very blurred” (E29). As a first analytical step to deal with this

ambivalence, key emerging themes regarding the conceptualisations of branded content were identified. Based on that, we were able to elicit that the experts’ key conceptualisations of the term branded content can generally be divided into two categories. When it comes to the question ‘who is in control of branded content?’ the experts’ opinions gravitate generally towards either a rather holistic perspective or a managerial one.

These two perspectives will be further explored and explained in the following chapters. ●





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# BRANDED CONTENT AS A HOLISTIC PHENOMENON

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**The holistic conceptualisation of branded content, which emerged during the expert interviews (E07, E09, E17, E18, E28), reflects the all-encompassing perspective identified in the literature review. This perspective acknowledges that nowadays virtually anyone who is digitally literate can become a content creator and distributor. Concentrating on what an organisation can control in terms of branded content is from this vantage point no longer sufficient for a holistic understanding of how branded content works in the digital age, particularly in the social media age.**

From a holistic or all-encompassing perspective, branded content is therefore defined as any manifestation associated with a particular brand in the eye of the beholder. The term ‘manifestation’ is here interpreted as any perceptible (e.g. visible) outward expression of the brand. It can be tangible or intangible as well as a combination of both.

Note the intentionally subjective element of this definition. You might be a corporate brand manager and see a video on YouTube created by somebody outside your organisation and you might think, ‘this has nothing to do with my brand’. But if, for instance, a few thousand people associate it, for whatever reason, with your company then you have a case in which content was produced by an external stakeholder affecting your organisation’s brand, positively or negatively, whether you realise it or not. Hence branded content is ‘any

manifestation associated with a particular brand in the eye of the beholder.’

The defining insight of this perspective is that the legal trademark or brand owner is not necessarily in control of the creation and/or distribution of content related to its brand. All kinds of stakeholders are able to create and distribute branded content – including but not limited to the customers or critics of a brand.

While this holistic conceptualisation makes an important point which has been supported by some of our industry experts, it also contains at least two considerable limitations. First and foremost, this conceptualisation of branded content is extremely broad. It defines, for example, the products and services of a brand as well as all marketing communications activities which are associated with that brand as part of its branded content. Secondly, this definition does not provide any guidance for marketing practice in terms of what ‘good’ branded content should look like.

Due to these limitations, it is thus no surprise that this holistic conceptualisation of branded content was only considered by a minority of the 30 experts amongst our sample. The majority sees branded content mainly as a managerial concept with a broad variety of nuances. This managerial perspective with its variety of nuances will be explored further next. ●





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# BRANDED CONTENT AS A MANAGERIAL CONCEPT

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**A common denominator, in contrast to the holistic perspective, is that the legal trademark or brand owner is interpreted as being largely in control of the content which is produced and distributed in relation to its brand. Due to this common denominator, we call this conceptualisation of branded content the managerial perspective. Branded content can thereby be interpreted as something that usually is wholly or at least in part created and/or funded by the brand's legal owner.**

“Branded content is every piece of communication – whether it is in the print form, the audiovisual form, the digital form, the theatrical form – it's any content that is created and paid either wholly or in part by a brand [owner]” [E25]

Since from this vantage point the content is wholly or at least in part created and/or funded by the brand owner, most of our experts assume that it can therefore be managed and controlled to a large extent by this focal organisation. While from a managerial perspective branded content is mainly seen as something that is co-created, various experts still interpret the brand owner as mainly in control, since the co-creators are usually in a contractual relationship with the legal brand owner (agencies, content production companies, media outlets, etc.).

When it comes to the co-creation of content with consumers in relation to a trademark owner's brand,

**“WHILE FROM A  
MANAGERIAL  
PERSPECTIVE,  
BRANDED  
CONTENT IS  
MAINLY SEEN AS  
SOMETHING THAT IS  
CO-CREATED, VARIOUS  
EXPERTS STILL  
INTERPRET THE BRAND  
OWNER AS MAINLY IN  
CONTROL.”**

a number of experts still assume that a certain level of control can be exerted by the brand owner over the content, if not fully in control of the creation of content by non-contractual third parties, the legal brand owner can at least initiate or influence such content creation, for example, through a competition for an organisation's customers or selective content curation.

“Content curation is quite a big area that we’re focusing on and user generated content is part of that: how can we find user generated content that supports our brand? So, for example, with [our client] there’s tons of user generated content that create joy for people, so how can we curate that ... and distribute it to support [the client’s] brand message?” [E18]

“the best branded content, or user generated content, comes as the result of a prompt, so, a brand [owner] asks consumers to do something and submit their thoughts, or whatever, so their ideas are the content.” [E17]

This managerial perspective corresponds with the integrated TMO (Trademark Owner) perspective identified in the literature review which was conducted during the first phase of the research project. According to the findings of the literature review, this managerial conceptualisation integrates the use of traditional, non-digital channels with digital channels and platforms for the dissemination of branded content. This content is usually initiated (and funded) by the brand's trademark owner,

however, the owner's level of control over the content varies. If an organisation pays for the production of a TV show, for example, it can be assumed that the organisation will exert a high level of control over the production and dissemination of the branded content. But, if an organisation sends a tweet, it has hardly any control over whether and how people will retweet that content. Therefore, in the latter case, only a low level of managerial control can be expected.

Analysing the different nuances of the experts' managerial perspective in further detail, we were able to sketch, in general, an understanding of branded content which revolves around five main areas: (1) engagement, (2) choice, (3) mode of delivery, (4) deliverable vs discipline, and (5) value.

These five key emerging themes regarding the conceptualisations of the term branded content are further explained in the following. ●







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# KEY EMERGING THEMES

What is branded content about  
from a managerial perspective?

5

## Key emerging themes

### 5.1 Engagement

In a managerial marketing context, branded content appears to be primarily about engagement [E01, E02, E03, E04, E05, E06, E07, E08, E09, E10, E13, E15, E16, E17, E18, E21, E22, E23, E24, E27, E28, E29]. For example, “good branded content engages” [E03]. Or: “I would see it [branded content] as engagement with stakeholders” [E23]. More precisely, branded content seems to be about active engagement [E02, E03, E04, E05, E09, E15, E17, E18, E22, E29].

“The point about content is it’s a communication that’s about engagement and the target audience actively engages in this piece of content” [E03]

### 5.2 Choice

The idea of active engagement leads to the second key theme, that audiences actively choose to engage with branded content [E02, E04, E05, E07, E09, E15, E24, E28].

Branded content is “the stuff that people choose to spend time with from brands. ... people are going to want to watch, read or engage with it” [E09]

“... they [the audience] have gone to watch that programme or watch that piece of content by choice” [E05]

“Good branded content could be almost anything. It’s something that I [as part of the audience] want to engage with” [E28]

“If content is good, it will be actively requested and consumed” [E03]

“ [Branded content is] content that the audience are going to genuinely want to watch” [E15]

“... it [branded content] needs to be good enough for people to opt to see it” [E24]

### 5.3 Mode of delivery (branded content vs. advertising)

Linked to the identified focus on engagement and choice, various experts appear to position branded content in opposition to interruption-based advertising [E01, E02, E03, E05, E07, E10, E21, E22, E24, E28]. The main point that seems to differentiate branded content from advertising appears to be the mode of delivery: non interruption-based vs. interruption-oriented. Or: pull vs. push. Branded content is “opposed to an advert, which aims to disrupt – it’s something that aims to engage people” [E22]. Advertising has “literally interrupted your TV programme, it interrupted the page in the newspaper you were reading” [E03]. In contrast to this, “people actively go and seek branded content. ... they’ve gone to watch that programme or watch that piece of content by choice. Whereas with interruption they have no choice” [E05].

“It [branded content] is 10 on engagement and 0 on interruption. Because advertising takes the interruption approach; this is the beauty of branded content – it is intended not to interrupt.” [E07]

“... if you create advertising ... you’re getting in the way of whatever it is the audience is actually wanting to consume – you’re disrupting that ... . If you create content ... the big differentiator is that you’re asking somebody to choose to engage with you – they have to make a decision to go and see your movie, or to watch your YouTube video, or to follow your feed on social media.” [E22]

“It [branded content] is any communications that a brand is putting out which are aimed at engaging an audience ... advertising is really all about interruptive messaging” [E02]

“If it’s something an advertiser has paid to have inserted to interrupt someone ... then I would class that as advertising. If it’s something that the brand has produced or funded, which people are actively choosing to seek out or ... engage with, then I would think of that as content” [E02]

“... in 90 per cent of cases an ad is something which is very interruptive and content is something which people are seeking out” [E02]

“I would say that 9 times out of 10 people actually want to avoid an ad and 9 times out of 10 people actually want to engage in a programme of their choice” [E24]

The findings indicate that while advertising is perceived by various experts as using primarily an interruption-based delivery approach (push), branded content is perceived as being primarily about a non-interruption-based rationale (pull). This is supported by a number of experts [E01, E02, E17, E18, E21, E22, E23, E28, E16].

“It [branded content] is definitely pull. Because if it’s push then that’s traditional advertising” [E18]

### **So, why does the different delivery approach between branded content and advertising matter?**

“One of the problems that they [the marketing communications industry] are all trying to solve is the changing nature of media consumption of consumers; not least being the fact that people skip ads, and now watch TV series on demand a lot of the time so they don’t see the ads. So, a lot of the reason for the increase in this [non-interruptive] approach is because there have been fundamental changes in the way that people consume and use media and digital technologies” [E06].



## Key emerging themes

“There’s more and more need for brands to find different ways to engage with consumers because the traditional media are changing and evolving ... I think the most important thing is that brands need to engage with consumers in new ways because the old, traditional models of advertising aren’t enough anymore” (E02).

### The opportunity

The rise of branded content as a new marketing communications concept can therefore be interpreted as a response to the fundamental changes in terms of the way in which audiences consume and use media and digital technologies.

### 5.4 Deliverable vs. discipline (branded content vs. content marketing)

Based on the findings so far it can be concluded that branded content in terms of its mode of delivery/delivery approach is primarily non-interruption-oriented. However, it is important to acknowledge that branded content can also be used within an interruption-based marketing communications context (for example, in an integrated marketing communications campaign).

Branded content can be involved in a pull as well as push marketing context (E04, E06, E09, E10, E14, E17, E28). For instance, to promote branded content, “there’s an element of push” (E28) needed.

With branded content “you can never start from a pull basis. I don’t think any content can. Just because you build it doesn’t mean they’ll come; that doesn’t apply anymore. That’s why even massive, great TV shows have to be promoted and they have to be pushed really hard.” (E10)

There appears to be a difference between branded content as a deliverable on the one hand, and the marketing of this deliverable on the other. In this context it emerged that a closer comparison of the conceptualisations of the term branded content and content marketing was needed.

While some experts use the two terms interchangeably (E14, E17, E21) others differentiate between the two concepts (E02, E08, E09, E16, E22, E24, E28). From this latter kind of perspective, branded content could be conceptualised as a tool, outcome or deliverable (E02, E04, E05, E08, E15, E28, E29) while content marketing could be interpreted as the discipline of the marketing of branded content (E02, E04, E08, E09, E15, E16, E20, E24, E28).

“I think branded content is the deliverable – the actual final asset that you’ve worked on. Content marketing is the discipline, so, it’s the process of how you got to the stage to deliver that content.” (E15)

“I suppose, at a theoretical level, branded content suggests the subject/the matter of, whereas content marketing suggests the marketing of the branded content.” (E08)

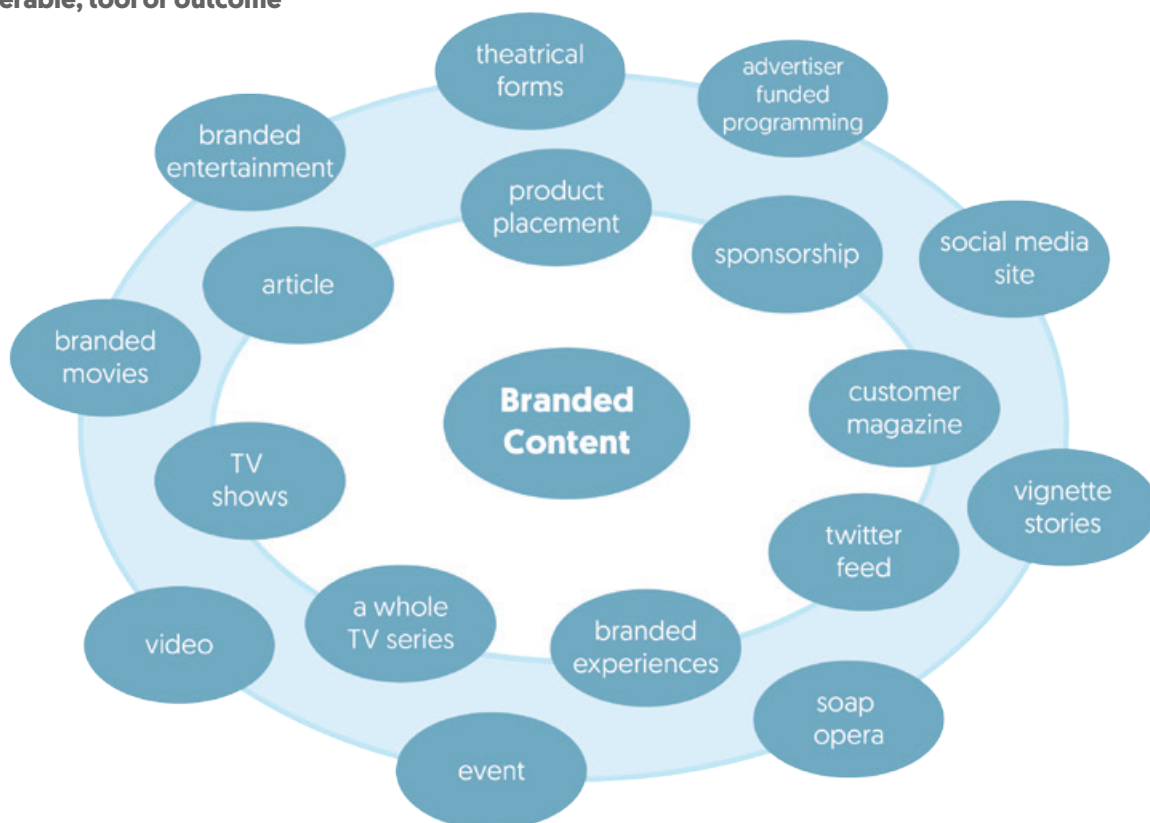
“... we think of content marketing as a marketing discipline” [E20]

“You can categorise content marketing as a discipline – as an approach.” [E09]

Content marketing therefore appears to be the broader concept compared to branded content [E02, E29]. However, this can only be identified as a tendency within our sample.

Furthermore, both concepts can be associated with a process-orientation. For instance, E02, E20, E21 and E30 provide examples of branded content as process-oriented while E02, E04, E08, E09, E15, E16, E24 and E28 do the same for content marketing as process-oriented. Nevertheless, there is a clear majority of examples of branded content as output, deliverable or tool. Some of these examples are presented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Examples of branded content as deliverable, tool or outcome**



**Source:** The expert interviews.

## Key emerging themes

In conclusion, it appears that at least as a general tendency, branded content can be conceptualised as a deliverable or outcome. Content marketing, on the other hand, can be conceptualised as the more process-oriented discipline of marketing this branded content, i.e. the marketing of some created and/or curated content. Therefore in the following the concept of content marketing as the process-oriented discipline of marketing branded content will be further investigated.

### 5.5 Content marketing as the discipline of marketing branded content

The following six sections each represent a key stage of content marketing as the process-oriented discipline of marketing branded content, based on some of the insights which emerged from the expert interviews. These six stages are just relatively briefly highlighted here, mainly through the use of relevant quotes, since the primary focus of the report remains on conceptualising the term branded content. To do exactly that, however, it appeared necessary to develop a better understanding of how content marketing as a discipline is conceptualised in marketing practice.

#### 5.5.1 Developing an understanding of the audience's needs, wants, interests and/or passions [E02, E04, E05, E07, E15, E16, E17, E18, E20, E25, E28, E29]

Identifying the right audience(s) and developing an in-depth understanding of their needs, wants,

interests and/or passions appears to be a key aspect of the content marketing process.

“Content marketing is always, always, always about the audience comes first. And I think that’s why publishers, and custom publishers have been so good at embracing the content challenge because they were always about understanding who their audience is” [E04]

“The marketing bit of content marketing is finding the audience” [E04]

Content marketing “largely fails when they [the content marketers] don’t consider ultimately the individuals who are going to consume that content and if people don’t do enough research into the audience that they want to target ... when you don’t carefully consider your audience in the first instance that’s where you really see the mistakes being made.” [E17]

It’s about understanding “what they [the audience] want to be informed about and how they would be entertained: what would be entertaining – what do they want to know?” [E28]

“When we come to sit down and think about what content’s interesting to people we don’t talk as a brand; we talk about what’s interesting to people” [E28]



“What you need to do is really understand the audience” (E07)

“You need to be talking of and engaging in a subject that people are passionate about” (E15)

### **5.5.2 Developing an understanding of and being in line with the brand’s core values, reason for being and positioning** (E01, E04, E13, E14, E16, E17, E18, E21, E22, E23, E24, E26)

Another important element of the content marketing process from a managerial perspective seems to be about being in line with the brand’s and/or brand owner’s core values, reason for being and positioning. Authenticity is a concept that has been mentioned in this context.

“... the experience of the content [needs to have] a natural resonance with the brand. So, if for instance Nike were to do something about relaxing on your holiday, this might be a wonderful thing to do and it might be a wonderful brand but it doesn’t have authenticity. So, I would say that’s a really important part: you need to have that natural ... resonance existing in there.” (E14)

“There’s probably no point making content that is so far beyond the brand’s sphere of influence that the connection is completely invalid – so, authenticity [is key].” (E18)

“Authenticity is key ... . But also, the other thing is that, primarily, branded content embodies the brand; it’s actually an embodiment of the brand.” (E04)

“I would describe branded content as content that is created by a brand to articulate their brand values” (E17)

The role of branded content is “to deliver a brand promise. So, in other words, to communicate the values of a brand” (E22)

“... the values of the content [should] resonate with the values of the company brand.” (E14)

“Any decent content ... has to tie in with the brand and their whole strategy piece” (E16)

Branded content as part of the content marketing process “should be showcasing attributes of the brand” (E01)

### **5.5.3. Clarifying the (marketing) objectives that branded content should achieve for the brand’s legal owner and the subsequent strategy** (E02, E07, E15, E16, E18, E20, E21, E25, E28, E30)

Various experts have pointed out that as part of the content marketing process, branded content needs to be aligned to the objectives which it is supposed to achieve. This also then needs to be applied to

## Key emerging themes

the specific strategic context in which content marketing is used.

“Take the content bit out: marketing is about using marketing communications to solve business challenges [...] to address specific objectives” [E20]

“I think content marketers have just been sitting in this kind of fuzzy world for five years and just been saying stuff that doesn't really mean a lot [...] it's just about figuring out how to use content to drive business objectives.” [E30]

“The strategy is important but I think that why you're doing it is equally important. It's almost a step back and asking: what are you trying to achieve? Is it numbers? Is it clicks? Is it engagement?” [E16]

You need “to be smart enough to actually figure out: what are the objectives that I want to achieve [with content marketing]?” [E30]

“So I would say content marketing ... encompasses things like working on strategy as to why a brand would get involved in content in the first place” [E02]

If you're doing branded content marketing it's about having a strategy” [E15]

“The key thing is doing the strategy first.

... so you need people who have a real understanding of how to create content, of what the brand is trying to achieve here and how to distribute that content.” [E07]

“If a brand says, ‘I want a content marketing strategy’, my assumption is that we want to make them become more of a publisher across all channels whether that be video, editorial, social, anything really.” [E18]

### **5.5.4 Creating engaging branded content, for example, through high quality, transparency, interactivity [E02, E03, E04, E06, E14, E18, E20, E22, E25, E26] and compelling narratives [E04, E05, E06, E07, E10, E20, E21, E24, E27, E30]**

Branded content as part of content marketing is “all about being good quality. So, high quality would be important. So, relevant to the interests of the user and well produced.” [E02]

“I think [branded content] should always go for quality.” [E25]

“Good content ... [is] something that's interactive” [E26]

“What branded content wouldn't be is a piece of content that is shouting a message at the consumer and is engaged in a one-way conversation .... You want its [branded

content's] role to be to ... interact with people more." [E18]

"Transparency is a huge issue. If a blogger is being supported financially by a brand there's a bad taste left in the mouth if you suddenly find out that they've been promoting a product, which looked like it was totally natural and unconceived, to then find out that actually the brand were paying those people to do it." [E06]

"I think there should be transparency [in content marketing] ... and I feel maybe the brother of authenticity is transparency in the sense that it's all part of the honesty family. So, it feels like if you're going to do something like this then be transparent about it." [E14]

"So, the challenge for us and the brand is how to tell a story that's compelling enough and good enough to be in that editorial slot rather than to be in the ad slot." [E24]

"Branded content is ... there for a commercial purpose. It is the commercial application of storytelling, in my view. And the things that most resonate around audiences are stories which are true .... [If] the brand plays a role in the narratives then that is fantastic." [E04]

That's what "content marketing does: for commercial purposes it pulls together, in an intelligent way, narrative traditions that are

deeply embedded in human consciousness." [E04]

### 5.5.5 Developing and implementing multi-channel distribution and promotion for branded content [E01, E05, E06, E07, E09, E15, E16, E18, E21, E22, E24, E25, E27, E28, E30]

A number of experts acknowledge that distribution is absolutely crucial in content marketing. However, it appears that expertise in the industry is rather under-developed when it comes to multi-channel distribution solutions.

"Distribution is key." [E05]

"Distribution is going to become crucial" [E16]

"I think all channels absolutely have a role to play, all channels can be used for content marketing" [E28]

"It isn't rocket science; it's just really thinking about the distribution. And that's where I think the branded content market is quite immature." [E07]

"With all branded content, distribution is the big headache, because there's no point in making all this great stuff if you can't get people to see it." [E06]

"Distribution is often not thought about, so you can have great branded content that

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never gets seen because they haven't got a distribution strategy around it [...] content is King but distribution is Queen. But the Queen is in charge." [E15]

"There have been lots of beautifully shot films where you get production companies saying they are the branded content experts, and they'll produce a beautifully shot viral and [only] 300 people will see it because actually quite often the distribution strategy is the most important thing." [E21]

"I don't think you can just say there's one perfect platform for it [branded content]. The point I would come back to is that I think a huge number of companies embark in this area, spend a huge amount on production and so on, make a beautiful video and have no distribution strategy. And I would argue that actually you should start with the distribution strategy right at the start because otherwise you run the risk of wasted investment" [E21]

"... you absolutely need to have a plan as to why you are putting that piece of branded content out there because unless you've got that you will fail; ... you absolutely need to know what you are doing." [E25]

"You can make as much content as you like but if no one knows about it no one sees it. And that's the danger of thinking that on YouTube

you've got so many views and that's somehow going to do a job for your brand. I think that's quite short-sighted. You need to be thinking more holistically about where else that content can live. You could get the broadcasters to promote it for you and make your money stretch really far" [E01]

The lack of expertise and attention when it comes to the distribution of branded content within the content marketing process is an interesting insight which needs to be addressed by the industry. Particularly noteworthy is the considerable lack of clarity between the differences in distributing and promoting branded content as part of the content marketing discipline. This appears to be interlinked to the challenges when it comes to the push and pull logic within content marketing as the discipline of marketing branded content. Further investigation is required here.

### 5.5.6 Measuring and evaluating the success of branded content and content marketing [E05, E16, E17, E18, E24]

Measuring and evaluating the efficiency and effectiveness of branded content within the content marketing discipline is another key stage but, again, this appears to be an area where more clarity and expertise is needed.

"Like any other form of media or advertising, for it to become a serious business sector,



there needs to be an effective way of evaluating it” [E24]

“I think measurement and proving ROI will be massively important. I think understanding the data around the audiences – because devices will be evolving, changing. How and where and why people consume content will be changing, so: measurement, data, and also technology” [E18]

“Another key area is how do you measure success? With the old-style advertising it's very easy to measure success – it's: how much has been sold? Or how many impressions have been delivered? Or how many click throughs have you got? But, actually, when you move into the realm of content, and when it's into engagement and things that are slightly less tangible, the measure of that success with brands investing far more money into it will become far more crucial.” [E16]

“In an online universe, you could see how many people could be watching it, where they've come from, where they're going afterwards [...] You've got an engagement you do not get with a 30-second ad. And if you can also make it entertaining or emotional then you've got.... And, again, you can track this by the way people comment on it on YouTube and you can see how much people are actually engaging and talking about it and sharing it socially. And its value, using those metrics, becomes really

robust ... you can actually see and measure the difference it makes” [E05]

While there are some ideas about measuring ROI from a digital perspective, measurements in non-digital environments appear to be more challenging.

## 5.6 Value

### 5.6.1 Value for branded content audiences

Based on the insights from the earlier key themes which emerged during the expert interviews, one point of departure in relation to the value of branded content was the following question: How does an organisation achieve an active engagement with its audiences through branded content?

From the perspective of the marketing experts, this appears to be primarily about providing some kind of added value to an organisation's audiences [E02, E03, E05, E08, E12, E14, E15, E16, E17, E20, E23, E26, E28, E29, E30]. For example:

“When I think about branded content I want to be creating content that is ultimately enriching and valuable to the consumer. ... You're creating something with the idea of adding value to the lives of your consumers.” [E17]

“It's all about consumer needs – enhancing their lives in some way or other”. [E16]

## Key emerging themes

However, what this ‘added value’ actually is which is supposed to enhance the audiences’ lives, seems to be different on a case by case basis. A movie in the cinema might, for instance, provide great entertainment for two hours, a book might do the same for even longer while a tweet might have a rather short-term effect. Therefore, the expression of ‘adding value to the lives of the audience’ used by some of the experts, needs to be taken with a pinch of salt. Despite this limitation, the principal idea that branded content needs to provide some kind of value appears to have potential.

“The target audience actively engages in this piece of content because they think there is some inherent value in it ... there’s something that makes them willingly spend their time rather than have their time interrupted by it.” (E03)

“Every time I [‘the brand’] talk to you I need to provide something of value”. (E28)

“I think anything can be branded content. As long as the consumer is getting something of value out of it.” (E16)

**The first key question is therefore: How can an organisation provide some kind of value to its audiences – particularly when it comes to non-interruptive branded content?**

**“I THINK ANYTHING  
CAN BE BRANDED  
CONTENT. AS LONG  
AS THE CONSUMER  
IS GETTING  
SOMETHING OF  
VALUE OUT OF IT.”**

Based on the experts' view, it seems to be about engaging with audiences "in an organic way" (E05), "a way that doesn't interrupt or annoy them" (E27), "on their own terms" (E29) and in "a meaningful way that adds value to their experience of your brand" (E17).

A case in point could be providing relevant experiences (E03, E08, E14, E17, E23, E29).

"I would imagine the best branded content is where the brand is bringing a genuinely fresh experience to the consumer." (E08)

It can be about providing entertaining content (E01, E02, E04, E05, E07, E08, E09, E10, E12, E16, E17, E18, E21, E22, E23, E24, E25, E26, E27, E28, E29).

"Good branded content is memorable and entertaining and that's the start and the finish of it." (E26)

It can also be about providing informative content (E02, E03, E05, E07, E08, E09, E10, E16, E17, E25, E28, E29).

"I think [branded content] gives brands the ability to engage with consumers in a different way than they might have in the past. They can tell more emotional stories or tell longer, more informative, stories" (E07)

It can be about providing educational content (E05, E17, E20, E23, E25).

"Depending on what the brief is, we will create the relevant content to address that challenge or to change consumers' perception. Some of the branded content we create will be educational" (E20)

Or otherwise useful/functional content (E03, E09, E18, E27, E29).

"I think the really interesting next step is about how you can be more useful as a brand. I think there's probably a role there probably mostly facilitated through branded content ..., more so than the traditional advertising concepts or formats or messaging, and that is to be generally useful and to provide utility to people in their lives through the content that we share and that we distribute as brands." (E09)

It is something that should have shareability (E02, E04, E07, E10, E15, E21, E22, E26, E28, E29).

"If you're not producing content that gets shared you're not producing content that's any good." (E28)

Further helpful points which have already been addressed under section 5.5.4 are:

- The content has to be of high quality (E02, E16, E17, E23, E25, E28)
- The content needs to provide transparency



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[E02, E06, E14, E30] and/or authenticity [E04, E14, E18, E22]

- Branded content should provide a compelling narrative [E04, E05, E06, E07, E10, E20, E21, E24, E27, E30]

**The next key question is: What's in it for organisations which want to use branded content?**

### 5.6.2 Value for the brand's legal owner

Our research findings indicate that branded content needs to provide mutual value for the brand's audiences as well as for the brand's owner – usually the legal trademark owner [TMO] [E02, E04, E14, E16, E17, E18, E23, E26, E28, E30].

“It's a bit of a value exchange; you're giving them something such as entertainment or you're advising them or helping them. So it's about the brand being a utility for the consumer, so the consumer then starts to actively or proactively engage with the brand rather than the other way around and just being shouted at.” [E18]

Important in this context is that branded content-driven engagement goes beyond 'likes' and 'followers':

“It's not about the likes and it's not about the followers. It's about the engagement and that continued conversation around whatever the topic is.” [E23]

Branded content provides organisations with the opportunity to earn an audience's active engagement with the brand [E16, E21, E22, E28].

Furthermore, it provides the following opportunities:

- To build their brand [E23, E24, E26] or damage it [E09, E16]
- To build relationships with individuals [E08, E15, E18, E25, E28] and/or whole communities [E02, E04, E15, E20]
- To create and nurture (new) audiences [E04, E05]
- To stimulate ongoing conversations [E17, E18, E23, E25]
- To stimulate interaction/interactivity [E08, E09, E17, E18, E20, E26]
- To build trust and increase credibility [E09, E16, E20, E25]
- To build loyalty and improve customer retention [E02, E28, E29]
- To build thought leadership [E15]
- To change audiences' perceptions [E07, E20, E21, E30]
- To create deeper immersion (e.g. reaching audiences on a deeper emotional level) [E06, E08, E09, E10, E14, E17, E18, E20, E23, E25]

- To create [more] cultural relevance for the brand [E07, E18, E23]
- To connect to the needs, wants, interests, and/or passions of the audience [E02, E04, E07, E15, E16, E17, E20, E28, E29]

### 5.6.3 Value for the content platform/channel owner

Branded content also provides value for the channel or platform owner [E01, E02, E05, E12, E14, E16, E20, E24].

“In essence any content that we do as a publisher is branded content; it's just branded content for us as a media owner. For a brand to get a piece of that content – that's essentially what branded content is – it's enabling a brand to take our core content and reach our core audience in the way that we do it ourselves but by weaving in and integrating their brand messaging and whatever the brand's objectives are. So, it's taking our content – as a media owner – but opening it up and giving access to a brand so that they can gain access to our audience in the most credible, real ways to them and that achieves objectives for them as well. From an ideal point of view it would be our core content merged with their core objectives and it achieves positive things for our readers and it achieves positive things for them as a brand because they're educating

our readers about their brand, so, that's how I would broadly explain it.” [E16]

“I've just told you when it does and doesn't work for us. When it's a 30-minute infomercial for the brand: 1) it wouldn't be compliant and 2) it's not doing anything for us as a broadcaster [...] and that's not doing anything for the brand as well... What the brand needs to remember is that they're trying to drive viewing as well; they want people to see the content they're making. So if they make it so dry and boring and non-entertaining that's not going to happen.” [E01]

“... actually what Channel 4 or the BBC or Channel 5 are trying to do with their content is they are trying to build their own brand. So, everybody's using content to try to build their brand, and Channel 4 are very specific about the kind of content they want because they're interested in building a stronger audience share and a stronger brand for them.” [E24]

### 5.6.4 The new 'Value of Branded Content' formula

As the findings have shown so far, branded content from a managerial perspective should reflect and amplify a brand's core values. It should also provide value to the brand owner's audiences. In other words, branded content provides mutual value. 'Everybody should win' as there should be a mutual benefit for the branded content audience, the

## Key emerging themes

brand's legal owner (TMO) and the media owner (platform/channel). Subsequently we have created the following formula as a first attempt to clarify the value branded content provides for its stakeholders.

$$V_{BC} = V_{BCA} + V_{BO} + V_{CP}$$

V = value

BC = branded content

BCA = branded content audience

BO = brand owner

CP = content platform/channel (platform)

As shown in the analysis of the data so far, first of all, branded content should provide value for the **audience** (BCA) which can be achieved through:

- The creation of engaging experiences (entertaining, informative, educational, etc)
- Connecting to the needs, wants, interests and/or passions of the audience
- High quality
- Transparency/authenticity

**“EVERYBODY SHOULD WIN, AS THERE SHOULD BE A MUTUAL BENEFIT FOR THE BRANDED CONTENT AUDIENCE, THE BRAND’S LEGAL OWNER AND THE MEDIA OWNER”**

- Being non-intrusive/subtle (although both soft sell/hard sell are possible depending on the context)
- Compelling narratives
- Shareability

Second, branded content should deliver value for the **brand owner** (BO), through providing opportunities [see also section 5.6.2]:

- To highly engage audiences
- To build its brand [long-term]
- To build relationships with individuals and/or whole communities
- To create and nurture [new] audiences
- To stimulate ongoing conversations with audiences
- To stimulate interaction/interactivity with audiences
- To build trust and increase credibility
- To build loyalty and improve customer retention
- To build thought leadership
- To change audiences' perceptions

- To create deeper immersion
- To create (more) cultural relevance for the brand
- To connect to the needs, wants, interests, and/or passions of the audience

Third, branded content should deliver value for the **platform owner** (CP), through:

- Bringing a potential new audience and/or additional traffic
- Highly engaging experiences
- Incremental revenue ●







DEFINING BRANDED  
CONTENT FOR THE  
DIGITAL AGE

# A MANAGERIAL DEFINITION OF BRANDED CONTENT

6

## A managerial definition of branded content

**Our research in the marketing industry identified that branded content can mainly be conceptualised either from a holistic or managerial perspective. The managerial perspective emerged as predominant within the marketing industry, which is captured and further explained in the following based on our analysis of the 30 interviews.**

### Definition

**From a managerial perspective, branded content is any output fully/partly funded or at least endorsed by the legal owner of the brand which promotes the owner's brand values, and makes audiences choose to engage with the brand based on a pull logic due to its entertainment, information and/or education value.**

### Explanation

- **Concrete examples of branded content:** From a managerial perspective, branded content is an output, for instance, a video, a TV series, a blog, a book, an event or a customer magazine
- **Branded content vs content marketing:** While branded content is conceptualised as an output, content marketing is conceptualised as the discipline of marketing branded content. Content marketing entails processes such as the planning, developing, creating, distributing, promoting and evaluation of branded content
- **Level of control:** From a managerial perspective, the creation of branded content is usually fully or partly funded by the legal owner of the brand. The key insight here is that the legal brand owner is conceptualised as being to a large extent in control of the branded content, i.e. the output. In the case of branded content curation, the legal brand owner might not fund but endorse the branded content, for example on its owned media
- **Managerial vs holistic perspective:** The managerial perspective of branded content differentiates itself from the holistic conceptualisation of branded content. For example, based on our research, user-generated content associated with a particular brand in a negative sense which does not promote the legal brand owner's values is still considered branded content from a holistic but not from a managerial perspective
- **Branded content vs advertising – it's a matter of choice and delivery:** From a managerial perspective, the idea of branded content making audiences choose to engage with the brand applies on two different levels. On a first level, the choice to engage is important, when it comes to the delivery mode, since branded content is based primarily on a pull-oriented logic. This is in contrast to advertising which is based primarily on a push-oriented logic. While advertising is usually interrupting the

**“THE AUDIENCE HAS  
TO CHOOSE AND  
‘PULL’ BRANDED  
CONTENT TO BE ABLE  
TO ENGAGE WITH IT.”**

newspaper, magazine or online editorial content or TV programme which the audience wants to engage with, branded content is based on a non-interruptive pull logic. In other words, the audience has to choose and ‘pull’ branded content to be able to engage with it. However, while branded content intrinsically follows a pull logic, it can achieve high levels of ‘earned’ distribution and/or promotion through [e]WOM/ shareability unlike advertising which is usually based on a high level of ‘paid for’ distribution. An example of earned distribution is a branded content video that has been promoted through a tweet by a personal friend. An example of paid for distribution is a branded content video that has been promoted through a TV ad by the legal owner of the brand (as part of a content marketing campaign)

- **Branded content can become part of a push-based content marketing campaign:** When branded content is promoted as part of a content marketing campaign it can potentially also be used in a push marketing context, e.g. Lego movie or John Lewis Christmas campaigns. On a second level, the choice to engage is important when it comes to the value which branded content provides to an audience. To make audiences choose to engage with a brand, branded content usually offers entertainment, education and/ or information value to its audiences. However, occasionally it could also provide a different kind of value, e.g. inspirational value. ●







DEFINING BRANDED  
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# CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

## Conclusion & recommendations

**This research has been a fascinating and insightful exploration of the ‘branded content universe’ from a marketing practitioner perspective. Two conceptualisations of the term branded content have particularly been investigated and explained. The holistic definition of branded content has an important role to play in understanding branded content in its widest sense. It also demonstrates that ‘these are scary times’ for brand managers and their organisations since nowadays virtually anyone can become a branded content creator and distributor for a brand on an unprecedented scale without the brand manager being in control of that. However, due to the holistic definition’s limitations in a marketing practitioner-oriented context, there was a need to explore further the different nuances of the managerial conceptualisations of branded content.**

In the process of our analysis we were able to identify a differentiating criterion between branded content and advertising as marketing managerial concepts. We were also able to provide some differentiating ideas between branded content and content marketing as managerial concepts. The resulting conceptualisations of branded content and content marketing from a managerial perspective can be interpreted as two of the key contributions of our research. Very insightful was the managers’ commitment to the concept of engagement when it comes to branded content. The managerial definition which we have subsequently presented might sound idealistic to some of us, however,

several experts were adamant: if it’s not engaging the audience then it’s not branded content.

Investigating the different conceptualisations and nuances of branded content in marketing practice was fascinating but also challenging. The experts often found it easier to talk about what branded content is not, and many answers circled back to the idea of value: the idea that consumers would willingly want to engage with branded content inside but equally outside of a transactional framework.

“I wouldn’t class TV spots as branded content I would class them as advertising. I would say content should have more of a value for the viewer than necessarily for the advertiser by creating maybe topical or valuable content that the audience are going to genuinely want to watch and maybe even share as opposed to something that’s just a marketing message.” (E15)

The rise of branded content as a [‘new’] marketing communications concept appears to have emerged in response to the fundamental changes to the way in which audiences consume and use media and digital technologies. The resultant opportunity for organisations which use branded content has been summed up as a fundamental insight by one of our experts:

“One of the problems that they [the marketing communications industry] are all trying to solve

**“DUE TO THIS  
TECHNOLOGICAL,  
OR MORE PRECISELY,  
SOCIO-  
TECHNOLOGICAL  
PARADIGM SHIFT,  
BRANDED CONTENT  
OFFERS AN  
ALTERNATIVE TO  
ADVERTISING  
THROUGH ITS PULL-  
ORIENTED LOGIC.”**

is the changing nature of media consumption of consumers; not least being the fact that people skip ads, and now watch TV series on demand a lot of the time so they don't see the ads. So, a lot of the reason for the increase in this [non-interruptive] approach is because there have been fundamental changes in the way that people consume and use media and digital technologies” [E06].

In the digital age, particularly the social media age, control has shifted: digitally literate audiences have not only choice but also voice. Audiences can embrace or dismiss content and therefore the organisation which owns the brand and which creates, funds and/or curates the content.

Due to this technological, or more precisely, socio-technological paradigm shift, branded content offers an alternative to advertising through its pull-oriented logic, in other words a non-interruption based approach. However, it is important to acknowledge that branded content needs a content marketing framework which often combines a pull and push logic. It also needs to be acknowledged that push-oriented approaches can similarly still deliver value for audiences.

The analysis of content marketing as the discipline of marketing branded content has also contributed to some important insights. For example, the considerable lack of clarity between the distribution and promotion of branded content as part of the



## Conclusion & recommendations

content marketing process. This is an important strategic issue which urgently needs further investigation as well as the push/pull logic. Another avenue for future research is represented by the concept of engagement which seems to be a rather complex and multi-faceted phenomenon in the context of branded content and content marketing. Furthermore, it also became clear that measurement and evaluation of branded content is absolutely crucial to further develop and establish the discipline of content marketing. However, the 'how' of measuring and evaluating appears to be rather unclear, particularly in the non-digital arena. Here we need also further research to be able to provide the industry with better approaches.

Last but not least, the work around the emerging 'Value of Branded Content' formula provides some helpful insights to further establish the worth which branded content can provide to its key stakeholders: the brand owner, the branded content audiences and the content platform owners and/or channels.

In terms of future developments, our findings support the idea that branded content will become a mainstream marketing communications concept and an integral part of marketing [E07]. Brand owners will become the new "media owners" who "develop their own content channels" and "curate their own audience" [E10]. This will change the media landscape as we know it [E14]. Many advertising agencies, for instance, will have to become content agencies [E06, E20].

More and more brands will get involved in producing content. Consequently, the volume of content production will grow considerably [E02, E28]. Therefore, the question for the right strategy will become more important: What are the actual strategic reasons why a brand gets involved in content production [E02, E29]?

Content marketing as a discipline will have to help with the distribution and promotional strategy of branded content [E16]. The quality of content production will become more important [E16, E23, E28]. Authenticity [E04, E05] and transparency [E02] are key. Also, another future option with a lot of potential appears to be branded content as something that will become more personalised and bespoke [E08, E30]. Last but not least, measurement and proving ROI will become key [E14, E16, E18].

Overall, the results of this research strongly indicate that branded content will have a more important role to play within the marketing industry as a whole in years to come. ●



## BCMA (Branded Content Marketing Association)

The BCMA is the global association for branded content practitioners, run by practitioners, promoting best practice, research, effectiveness, sharing knowledge and growing the branded content industry. We create the opportunity to connect with the leading experts in branded content. Our mission is to champion the concept of branded content to the global marketing industry.

For more information please visit [www.thebcma.info](http://www.thebcma.info)

Contact:

Andrew Canter

Global CEO, BCMA

[acanter@thebcma.info](mailto:acanter@thebcma.info)



## Brand Strategy Research Group at Oxford Brookes University

The Brand Strategy Research Group at Oxford Brookes University is a group of scholars and practitioners dedicated to research related to brand strategy and management.

For more information please visit [www.business.brookes.ac.uk](http://www.business.brookes.ac.uk)

Contact:

Bjoern Asmussen

Senior Lecturer in Marketing & Co-leader of the Brand Strategy Research Group

Oxford Brookes University

[bjoern.asmussen@brookes.ac.uk](mailto:bjoern.asmussen@brookes.ac.uk)



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Contact:

Ross Williams

Research Director, Ipsos Connect

[ross.williams@ipsos.com](mailto:ross.williams@ipsos.com)



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