For many boutique IT service firms, content marketing really means the creation of hundreds or thousands of short, shallow (a.k.a. borderline worthless), tech-based blog posts and social media entries. And by the time firm leaders realise this kind of content is as useless as a neck massage en route to the gallows, they are up to their eyeballs in unexpected production costs. But they still need to hire field salespeople to bring in new business. Then what the point in running this content circus? Well, let's see...

10 Self-Defeating Content Marketing Blunders Boutique IT Firms Habitually Make

And What To Do About Them

Tom 'Bald Dog' Varjan

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*H*ave you ever thought about the relationship between birds and politicians?

If not, here is something to scratch your head over.

Think of an owl. A normal, pedestrian, garden-variety owl that, according to folk tales, is supposed to be a smart and wise animal.

Then owls gather in a group and we call them a parliament of owls.

That's fine because some people think that parliaments are full of smart and wise people.

But as it turns out, owls are rather dumb birds. It turns out that African grey parrots, starlings, robins and even normal backyard chickens outsmart owls.

And the reason why a group of them is called a parliament is because someone thought that way they can boost owls' self-esteem.

And now we're circling back to politicians.

We know that most of them are arrogant, power-hungry ego maniacs, who are not exactly the smartest specimen of the human race.

And now think about that in most countries there is a parliament and a congress.

And do you know which group of animals is called a congress?

Salamanders. Yes, another species of animals fairly low on the animal smartness scale.

And when I look at some IT firms' content marketing plans, I sometimes think they have been created by a parliament of owls in close collaboration with a congress of salamanders.

They certainly shoot their own firms in the foot, and for good measure, kick them in the balls as well.

With that in mind, let's look at some of the biggest content marketing blunders boutique IT service firms often make.

Blunder #1: Lack of content marketing strategy (positioning, targeting, pricing, branding, etc.)

Writing thousands of 750-word $20 blog posts per week is not content marketing. It's lunacy. A waste of time, money and energy.

Many boutique IT service firms operate as IT gunslingers, instead of IT snipers.

What's the difference between them?

IT gunslingers operate on a "Ready => Fire => Fire => Fire" basis. They have no plan or strategy. They make up their minds (Ready) and keep doing whatever they've decided to do (Fire). And regardless of whether it works or not, they keep doing it (Fire again and again until out of ammo).

They don't 'waste' their time on trivial nonsense like thinking, planning and aiming.

They show up with their proverbial revolvers, a.k.a. flavours of the month methodologies, and start shooting from the hip all over the place, hitting some trees, window frames, stray cats, wandering grannies and sometimes their real targets.

But don't believe what you see in Western movies. Those revolvers were notoriously inaccurate. So those gunslingers hit some and miss a lot.

But gunslingers don't care because they focus on quantity not quality: "We must create 10 billion blog posts per week, so we can take our name out there".

And they believe the more they shoot, the more they can achieve, even if they keep missing their targets. The emphasis is on quantity.

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And some firms prefer the sniper approach (Ready => Aim => Fire). Their goal is to hit every target with one single bullet.

That is, every content piece is carefully targeted, aimed and fired. It's quality over quantity: "We create one min. 2,500-word "deep" authority content piece per month and repurpose it in 4-6 different ways throughout the month."

Bird's eye view?

Magnitude of miss

Aiming error

Target   1,000 metres   Shooter
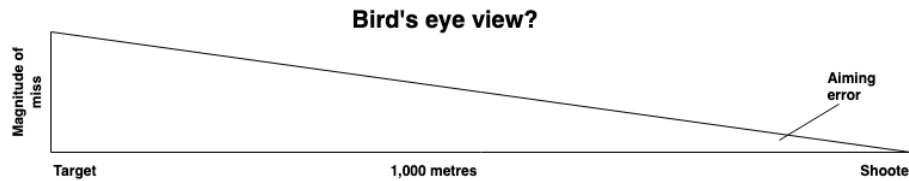
Unlike gunslingers, snipers understand that the tiniest aiming errors can cause huge misses. Snipers also understand that there are many factors, like wind speed and direction, barometric pressure, range to the target, altitude, elevation of the sniper and the target, ambient temperature, humidity, target movement, mirage, light source, etc., that they can't control, so they have to be as accurate as possible on the factors they can control.

If your aiming error is only 0.1° (0.11%), you miss your target by 1.74 metres.

Blunder #2: Lots of creation but little distribution

This is a very interesting dilemma.

Many firms create lots of content because writing is something that is easy to delegate.

Also, they can always find cheap writers on Upwork or Fiverr who are willing to produce tonnes of materials for pennies.

Well, the quality is likely to be pretty low, but those firm leaders focus on quantity not quality.

So, now the content is coming in tidal waves and piling up.

But because there is no content marketing strategy in place and no one is in charge of content distribution, nothing gets published.

In the best case, all that content gets uploaded to the firm's blog and that's all. And how much interaction is there on that blog? Very close to zero.

In the worst case, it doesn't get uploaded at all. It goes on some to-do list which never gets done.

As you do distribution, make sure you distribute articles both on to your own platform (website, blog) and other platforms (social media, Medium, trade publications, etc.).

Blunder #3: No repurposing

Neck-and-neck with distribution is repurposing. Well, rather the lack of it. Most firms use their original content pieces but do nothing to repurpose them to other formats.

The problem is that different people consume content in different ways, so without repurposing, you cut out potential buyers.

Here is an example for repurposing based on a previous assignment.

In the initial project description, the client asked me to write 8-12 500-700-word blog posts per week. The problem was that the firm's existing blog posts were shallow and borderline useless, creating no interaction on the blog.

Then the firm hired me and I suggested long and "deep" articles.

After having finished the first 2,300-word article amended with process visuals, we created a new repurposing and distribution pattern.

We repurposed this one article and distributed it in several channels over the whole month[1].

1. **Monday:** Post the article
2. **Tuesday:** Make a 5-10-minute video of Monday's article and upload it to all your social media channels.
3. **Wednesday:** Turn Monday's article into a 1-pager or a 4-slide PowerPoint as PDF. Email it to your list and include in the email a link to Monday's article and Tuesday's video.
4. **Thursday:** Turn the article into an image and your social media channels. Link it to Monday's post, Tuesday's video and Wednesday's PDF.
5. **Friday:** Go to groups and forums. Ask a question on the article's topic and mention that you've just written a detailed article on that topic. Send people to a registration page for your gated content. Yes, a 2,500-word well-written piece with some "How to" parts can be gated.

Within nine months, the firm's email list (a.k.a. the most fertile ground of future clients) grew by 61% and the new subscribers hired the firm for $1.7 million worth of new high-margin projects.

Blunder #4: Shallow content

Shallow content is content written for the bottom range of the content pyramid.
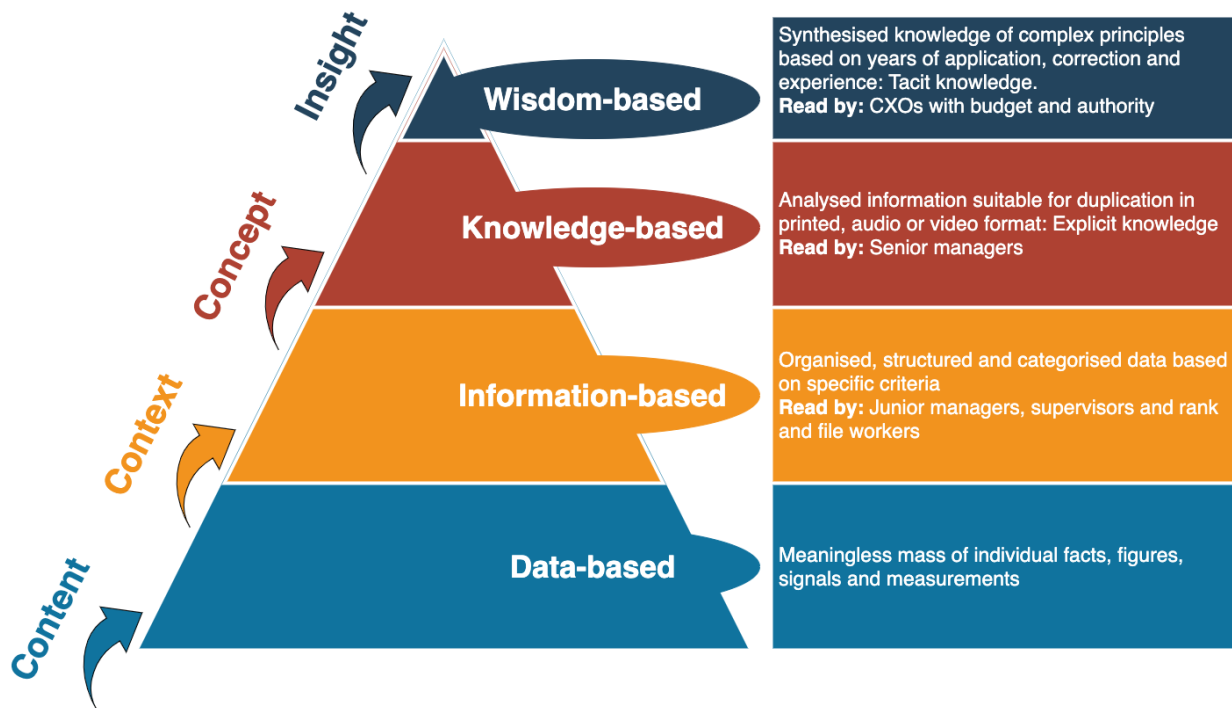
It is heavily tech-driven, so most of the readers are low- and mid-level tech professionals (definitely NOT

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[1] As a former corporate tech buyer, I can report to you that one "authority" content piece is better than a 20 500-word $20 blog posts written by some kid in a third-world country with broken English and zero tech background. No executive reads such gibberish. Remember, it's your written words (content and copy) that set the perception of your firm either as a respected industrial authority or as one of the thousands of fungible IT vendors.

CIOs and CTOs) without budget and hiring authority. And that alone makes this kind of content useless.

At the bottom, we have nothing more than imbecilic dump of over-hackneyed rhetoric and vending-machine clichés based on an almost random heap of haphazardly patched together words and phrases sitting on websites as cyber vomit and literary excrement that no one reads and gives two shits about.

Content in the lower region of the pyramid is based on explicit knowledge. That is, it can be readily articulated, codified, stored and accessed. It can be easily transmitted, received and memorised.

Good examples of explicit knowledge are encyclopaedias, textbooks, training manuals, documents, procedures, and how-to type audio and visual materials.

Yes, content in the lower region can be produced by competitively priced generic content writers, but the result can be low readership and interaction. Even worse is that generic writers are unlikely to understand your technology and may write something that can land you in a lawsuit. So, it's the high risk of low price.

By contrast, at the top, we have valuable, intelligent, engaging, action-oriented so-called "authority or C-suite" content that the cream of the crop of your target market will notice, read, comment on, love, remember, share, link to and take action on.

Content in this region is based on tacit knowledge. It takes a long time to obtain and is difficult to express, extract and transfer to others by writing it down or verbalising it. It includes personal wisdom, expertise, perspectives, insights, and intuition gained over many years of application and experience.

Granted, content-based content is cheap and easy to produce, but that's not what C-suite people read. They read concept- and insight-based content. The problem is that that kind of content is neither cheap nor easy to produce.

The good news is that for the money many firms spend on low-end trash content is enough to develop less better pieces.

Content in the upper range requires industry-specific copywriters with a good understanding of the client's industry. This kind of content has high readership and reader interaction.

Since firm leaders expect this kind of content to play a significant part in client acquisition, they often hire copywriters, not content writers. Yes, copywriters come with much higher price tags than content writers, but those firms play for high returns not for low price.

Blunder #5: Failing to contribute to client acquisition

If your content can't bring in new business, it's as useless as a barber shop on the steps of the guillotine and should be scrapped.

You may get all the Twitter followers and retweets, Facebook likes, LinkedIn connects, etc., but they don't pay the bills and don't make payroll.

The problem with some content is that it's good enough to have people enter your sales funnel but is not good enough to have them make progress inside the funnel towards the buying decision.

So, they get stuck at the top of the funnel and stay there until they die.

Oh, they voraciously read, watch and listen to your content, but since it's low-level content, there is nothing in it that would propel readers forward towards the decision-making point.

Blunder #6: Focusing too much on search engines at the expense of real readers

Many firms' content is fully 100% search engine-focused. They use the content to generate traffic to

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their websites but because their content is created with SEO (search engine optimisation) in mind, it does nothing for conversion.

Looking at content on a continuum, content is either SEO-focused for traffic generation or human-focused for traffic conversion.
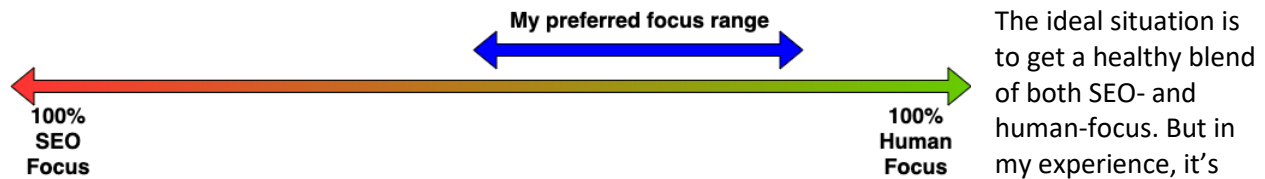
The ideal situation is to get a healthy blend of both SEO- and human-focus. But in my experience, it's better to focus more on humans. In fact, Google rewards human-focused content. It also recognises and penalises content that is manipulated to trick the search engines for undue attention.

Look, Google employ hundreds of hyper-smart engineers with advanced degrees to make sure no one can trick the system, so the best bet is not even to try.

Maybe you can gain something in the short-run, but in the long run you can only lose. And when you get caught, because you eventually do, Google's revenge will be very swift and very expensive.

And no matter what The International Cheeseracing Association, the American Voodoo Underwear Slapping Council or even The British Humpty Dumpty Reassembling Society says, the reality is, it's better to have fewer website visitors with higher conversion than having more visitors with poor conversion.

Higher SEO-focus results in higher number of visitors. Higher human-focus results in higher visitor-to-lead conversion.

But you can use many methods to bring visitors to your human-focused website and convert them. But if your website is overly SEO-focused, you end up with lots of website visitors and pathetically low conversion.

Blunder #7: Failing to integrate in- and outbound marketing initiatives

In many firms, inbound and outbound marketing initiatives run parallel, but, in many cases, the inbound team doesn't know about what the outbound team is doing and vice versa.

The main reason is that inbound marketing is done by the marketing people and outbound marketing is done by individual salespeople, called prospecting.

The problem is that both teams communicate totally different messages.

The inbound marketing team's message is carefully planned and crafted, based on the firm's brand book.

But the salespeople's prospecting message is pretty haphazard.

No, this is not a general opinion, but an opinion based on what so many IT salespeople are doing: Flying by the seat of their pants and winging their interactions with buyers.

And we all know where that approach leads to: 43% annual attrition (have you thought about how many clients departing salespeople take with them?), 49% of salespeople almost never reach their quota and 27% fail to sell enough to cover their cost of employment.

That's the high price firms pay for expecting new salespeople to hit the road running without even one minute of training, orientation and integration into the firm.

Blunder #8: Haphazard or no tracking

Here we have to make a difference between inbound and outbound marketing.

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Inbound efforts are easy to track, but many firms don't bother.

When it comes to metrics, KPIs (**K**ey **P**erformance **I**ndicators) and tracking in general, it's good to have both leading and lagging indicators.

- **Leading (predictive or a priori) indicators, a.k.a. causes,** predict what can happen in the future. Most leading indicators you can control. E. g. Number of meetings you have with qualified buyers, number of inquiries, etc.

- **Lagging (postdictive or a posteriori) indicators, a.k.a. effects,** report what's already happened. Most lagging indicators can't be directly controlled. E. g. cost of customers acquired (COCA = Total marketing investment / Number of customers acquired) or cost of marketing per unit sold.

The problem is that most firms track lagging indicators, like financial indicators, but the problem is that by the time you get the financial indicators, it's too late to control anything significant.

As Ron Baker of the [Verasage Institute](#) is fond of saying, "It's like timing your Sunday roast with the smoke detector."

That's why it's important to track both leading and lagging indicators, but the emphasis should be on leading indicators, indicators that that are the front end of the revenue-generation chain. Indicators like number of leads generated, number of leads qualified, number of sales conversations or number of proposals requested/submitted/accepted.

Blunder #9: Making content overly tech-focused

Granted, buyers hire IT firms to provide their tech expertise that results in significant positive transformation in buyers' businesses.

So, indirectly though, buyers hire IT firms for business improvement, Not tech improvement.
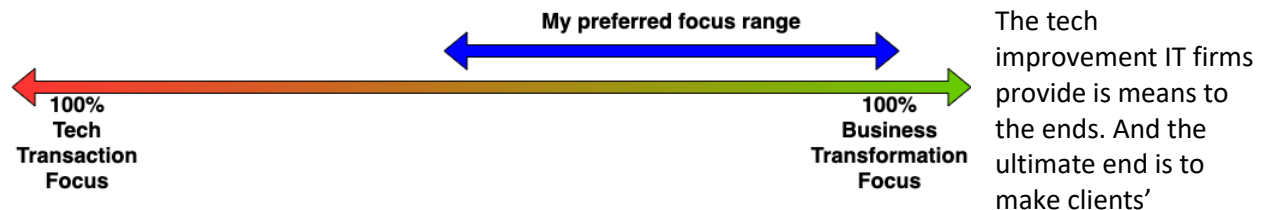
The tech improvement IT firms provide is means to the ends. And the ultimate end is to make clients' companies more profitable.

Ignoring this desire, most IT firms' communication talks about technical transaction: "We give you X technical deliverable and you give us Y amount of money for it."

Is it surprising that so many IT service firms are treated as fungible vendors, not as respected industry authorities, and that they keep coming up against price- and other objections?

The problem is that several members of the C-suite are only superficially tech savvy and don't understand the nuances of your technology.

So, when you communicate using hard-core tech jargon, they just stare at you like a fish in a shopping bag.

But they understand the business improvements they're seeking.

But instead of just saying that you can improve your clients' profits, which is a lame statement (everyone says that), explain in some easy-to-comprehend tech terms how you can contribute to profit improvement.

Blunder #10: Spreading yourself too thin

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Some firms get so carried away with content marketing that they stop all other forms of marketing.

They become marketing agencies and focus solely on content marketing.

And, of course, they want to do every aspect of content marketing.

They want to do all existing social media platforms, guest blogging, podcast guesting and everything else under the sun.

The situation is similar to having too much bread and too little jam. You try to spread the jam evenly, but all you can taste is the bread. No jam.

The same happens when you spread yourself too thin with content marketing. You can't pay due attention to any platform. You end up rushing from Facebook to LinkedIn, then to Instagram, then to Pinterest and then all the other channels.

Start by researching the platforms where your target market congregates. Do both quality- and quantity research: What level of people are on that channel and how many of them.

If you find a platform with 100,000 shop supervisors and another with 1,000 COOs, then focus on the COO platform.

Out of the 1,000 COOs, some may hire you but shop supervisors don't have the required budget and authority to initiate engagements.

Then starting with 1-2 platforms, develop a content distribution process, document it and start generating and distributing content on those platforms.

Blunder #11: Impatience

As [Dave Gerhardt](#) write in his article, *[Blogging for your business is an investment, not a get rich quick scheme](#)*.

Content marketing does work but it takes 12-18 months to gain significant traction.

And this is why it's idiotic to do any content marketing at the expense of practical lead generation.

Content marketing can nicely augment lead generation, but it can't replace it.

Imagine a baited mousetrap. Yes, I know, it's a morbid example, but stay with me for a moment.

The piece of cheese is content marketing and the springy bit is lead generation.

And without the springy bit, you soon run out of cheese but have nothing to show for it.

With that in mind, before you go headlong into content marketing, look at your lead generation system and make sure it keeps your business alive until your content marketing programme kicks in. Otherwise the whole thing can just kick you in the teeth and you end up with no new clients and a bill for your content marketing efforts.

Blunder #12: No Dedicated Content Team

Just as service delivery requires project teams, content marketing also requires content teams.

But there is a huge problem with most content teams.

They are not tight-knit teams but loose-knit work groups

What is the difference?

Roughly this...

WORK GROUPS VS. REAL TEAMS	
Traditional Workgroups	**Cohesive Teams**
Order of commitment and accountability... 1. Individual – Self 2. Group members 3. Engagement (Project, mission, etc.)	Order of commitment and accountability... 1. Engagement (Project, mission, etc.) 2. Team 3. Individual – Self
Internal competition among group members	External competition with competitors and internal collaboration and cooperation with team members
May individual – mainly hidden - agendas	One single agenda: To achieve set objectives
Stale and stodgy	Innovative
Consists of hierarchy of members	Consists of networks of members
Autocratic – often hands-off – leadership	Participative hands-on leadership
Kick starters	Self-starters
No linkage between the group's success and the company's success	Direct linkage between the team's success and the company's success
Independent or co-dependent members	Interdependent members
Group members tolerate each other and the work they do	Team members enjoy both their work and the company of people with whom they work
No sense of urgency to get the work done	There is a sense of urgency to get the work done
Avoid risk and ambiguity	Deal with risk and ambiguity as they arise
When one member justifiably quits due to management problems (abuse, unnecessary managerial pressure, etc.)...	
...the rest of the group breathes a sigh of relief	...the rest of the team is likely to follow suit[2]

Summary

Although we've covered 12 content marketing blunders, in my experience, #12 is the biggest problem.

The so-called content marketing team is nothing more than a loosely connected work group. Usually a group of freelancers hired from the four corners of the universe.

They've never met.

So instead of close collaboration, they merely performed their assigned tasks 100% out of context under the micromanagement of an in-house intermediary.

Sadly, with that approach, IT firms can only land low-end professionals who tolerate this treatment and

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[2] Top-tier talents are recruited individually, but in case of problems with management, they leave en masse. When Steve Jobs resigned from Apple in 1985, five additional senior employees and several top-tier designers and developers also quit. When Yahoo CEO, Marissa Mayer, banned working from home in February 2013, the cream of the crop of the developers quit within a few days.

associated low pay.

No, they are not bad people. They are just not suitable for team work.

And regardless of their individual expertise, the danger lies in the structure and character of the groups in which they work.

I was living in the UK when France and the UK were busy digging the Channel Tunnel.

The problem was that the British diggers used imperial units, whereas the French used metric units.

And guess what happened?

The French and the British diggers didn't meet in the middle. They missed each other quite a bit and then spent a small fortune on expensive correction.

Now imagine that content creation is the French side of the Tunnel and content distribution is the British side.

And if you want the two sides to meet, you have to synchronise content creation and content distribution.