Why Content is a Waste of Time

It all begins with the 'why'. Ever caught yourself wondering: *why am I reading this? Why am I writing this?* If this sounds familiar, then it's simple: you're wasting your time. You're wasting your resources, wasting your copywriter's precious time, wasting your audience's attention.

Whatever went wrong – whether it was a half-formed idea, under-researched content or hastily outreached – the answer should never be 'let's churn the thing out anyway.'

A piece of content is not like a bingo ball. It should not be churned! (Image via Flickr)

While it is important to maintain a consistent content production, you should never write, create or design something just for the sake of it. In this paper I will detail a few ways to prevent your content from becoming a waste of time.

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Inception

Let's start at the beginning: the brainstorm.

It's simultaneously the best and worst way to come up with new ideas: great in that they provide a space for different minds to collaborate creatively, not so great in that they can often turn into a huge waste of time.

The concept of 'brainstorming' was developed by Alex Osborn, an advertising executive, author and creative thinker in the 40s. According to Osborn, a brainstorm is supposed to follow 4 rules: 1) come up with as many ideas as possible; 2) explore and prioritise the truly original ones; 3) refine and expand on the ideas generated; 4) refrain from criticism throughout the exercise.

While these are – in theory – good ideas, they can actually have negative consequences. Studies have shown that in large groups, brainstorms encourage a sort of 'bystander effect,' where people make less of an effort because they rely on other team members to be productive. This also isn't a great environment for those with social anxiety, or 'evaluation apprehension', where an individual fears rejection or ridicule if they speak their mind.

So how do you prevent a pointless brainstorm? Here are a few suggestions:

1) Keep it small. Limit the number of people involved to a handful – that way there will be less of a chance of 'bystander effect' or 'evaluation apprehension.'

2) Combine individual and group ideas. At the beginning of the session, let everyone freewrite. This is often done in creative writing workshops to inspire writers and help

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them overcome writer's block. For a few minutes, have everyone just pour out ideas. Don't let their pens leave the paper. At the end, you can evaluate the outcomes as a group, and you'll get the benefits of both solitary and group work.

3) Brainstorm for the brainstorm. Sit down, alone, and come up with a few ideas beforehand. If anything, these will help keep the flow going, as you'll have ammunition at the ready to fill any awkward silences.

Production

After you've come up with a killer idea, it's time to put it into practice. However, this is often the source of the downfall: something gets miscommunicated, a draft doesn't get approved in time, the brand guidelines get lost in an endless trail of emails.

For the sake of your clients' money, your colleagues' time, and – most of all, the mental well-being of your copywriter/graphic designer/whoever is creating your content – *use briefs.*

According to the DMA's survey on the state of British copywriting, 68 percent of the 433 respondents said that poor briefs are the biggest barrier to producing good work.

Essential things to include in a brief:

1) Tone of voice (is it playful? Buzzfeed-y? Professional? Informative? Be specific! This is the hardest, most time-consuming thing to change in a piece of content.)

2) Things to avoid mentioning (competitors, sensitive issues, controversial topics, etc.)

3) Length (for written pieces)

4) Objective of the content (where it is going to be published, who is going to read it, why is it being created, etc.)

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5) Brand guidelines

Completion

After your content's been written, designed or crafted, it's time to get it out in front of the right eyes to get the right results. But this is another area full of potential downfall: a poorly-written outreach email can make a huge amount of difference in your content's success.

Keep everything brief: condense your article or piece of content down to a few sentences, and request that they email for more information. You want to encourage interaction. Make the outreach email sound like a professional version of your natural speaking voice: not too robotic, but not overly friendly either.

Here's a basic outline:

Introduce yourself, but keep it brief: 'My name is Eve, and I work in content production at Tug Agency.' That's all you have to say.

Sum up your content in one-two lines: 'We're writing/designing a piece on _____ and we wondered if you might be interested in publishing it, if you think it will benefit your readers.'

Offer them a sneak peek (but make them work a little bit for it): 'If you'd like to see the piece, please don't hesitate to email me and I'll send it over.'

The Bottom Line
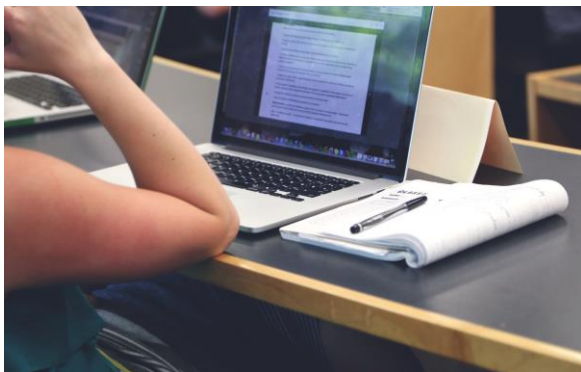
Unfortunately this isn't a fail-proof recipe for success. There's always a bit of trial and error when it comes to online content. But follow these tips, and you'll have a much better chance of creating something successful, thought-provoking and original.

Sources:

Photos from http://startupstockphotos.com/

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https://hbr.org/2015/03/why-group-brainstorming-is-a-waste-of-time

http://dma.org.uk/article/why-your-copywriter-looks-sad?utm_campaign=3485907&utm_content=20267891396&utm_medium=email&utm_source=Emailvision