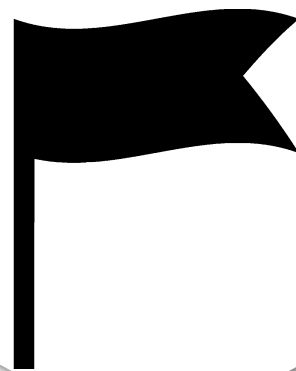


# In Content We Trust



## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Interested in knowing what consumers have lost over the past several years?** This is affecting every industry, resulting in longer sales cycles for all. It is a problem, but Margot offered her solution.
- **Want to empower your audience?** Margot discussed – in great detail – the 3 tools she believes are needed to do just that. Interestingly, they date all the way back to the Renaissance era.
- **Wondering what to do when your brand is vulnerable?** Margot explained that this can actually be a good thing if handled correctly. She suggested 4 steps to follow and backed it up with an excellent present-day example.

### SPEAKERS

Margot Bloomstein  
and Kelly Schott  
(TheCR)

### COMPETENCIES

CMM1, CMM2, CMM3

### MATURITY PHASES

Culture,  
Community  
Management

# OVERVIEW

- **Margot's background.** Margot is the Principal of Appropriate Inc. She is a Content Strategist, Keynote Speaker, Author and Teacher. Her workshops center on content-driven strategy and message architecture. Over the last few years, she has focused her research on how brands can improve and foster trust through their use of content and design. Specifically, how they can use content and design to empower their audiences.
  - Another aspect of Margot's business is researching new ways to bring vulnerability and human voice into an organization's content in addition to cultivating other voices within the community.



## OVERVIEW

- **Most people don't trust or believe most of what they hear.** Whether you work in retail, government, security, etc., a lot of marketing falls flat now and sales cycles take longer. Most messages don't motivate action because many people don't trust brands like they used to trust them. Different audiences across all industries have endured failures of leadership, inconsistent messaging, deceptive practices, etc. They've lost trust. When people don't know who to trust, they tend to adopt a posture of cynicism. That's a tough position to be in if you're in marketing, content management or content creation.
  - People are turning away from experts. People are turning instead to hearing from people just like them. However, they're also starting to realize that those filter bubbles can be gamed now, too, and are turning inward even more than they were before. This can be dangerous because they can start to mistrust even their own gut instincts. They lose confidence in their ability to make good decisions when they are surrounded by media, politicians and other organizations that tell them not to trust the evidence of their own eyes. This just adds to the cynicism.
  - As a marketer and/or content strategist, this is where you need to meet them. To regain your audience and their trust, you need to rebuild their confidence and then empower them to make good decisions. Affirm their hope. People are still interested in learning. There is still an enthusiasm for feeling knowledgeable.

# BEST PRACTICES

- **Learn from history.** In the 1500's people also struggled with trust issues. At the time, information and how they used that information was starting to change. Previously, people who sold goods hauled their wares town-to-town in a region. In the Renaissance era, trading families and empires began to emerge in order to gain greater profits. The catch for that to work meant that trade merchants needed trusted information from the faraway cities in which they chose to do business.
  - George Giese, a Renaissance-era trading merchant, ran import and export businesses across Europe. To make good decisions, he relied on the people who lived in those foreign cities to write periodic updates on the economic conditions. Those foreign correspondents were the first journalists. They would empower merchants with information offered in a consistent, objective tone of voice. They would also offer a unique perspective cultivated from their lived experiences there. They were open to learning, taking in new information, revising their previous recommendations, etc. They didn't give a false pretense of knowing everything. Instead, they offered a sense of vulnerability grounded in listening and continuous learning. They kept themselves open to new information.
  - Authority and consistency are still valued today. Authority comes from being willing to go where your audience cannot go. It empowers us, as consumers, to make better choices. That can be cultivated in the context of an online community. Brands that can offer a sense of humility – and admit to mistakes – portray a level of vulnerability that can increase trust with an audience.

# BEST PRACTICES

- Jay Rosen, a Professor of Journalism at NYU, defines authority as: “...*simply the right to be listened to, a legitimate claim on public attention. You begin to have authority when you offer a report that users cannot easily get on their own.*” When brands have authority, their audiences reward it with trust and loyalty. We see our interests and values reflected in where they focus and the facts they offer. When a brand breaks from what its audience knows and trusts in its voice or subject matter, that’s when it becomes difficult for consumers to reconcile their knowledge of the brand. Similarly, if audiences aren’t provided with content that meets their needs, not only is the brand being inconsistent, it can also become irrelevant and stoke cynicism.
- Creeping inconsistencies from brands can be tricky because they erode trust. Like us, our content users look at the world now with more skepticism than trust. Some skepticism is healthy, but when people reach the point of cynicism, that’s when they stop taking in new information.
- When institutions who were once trusted tell consumers not to trust the evidence of their own eyes, it’s called Gaslighting. It affects people’s ability to trust themselves, to make good decisions and to trust in the brands around them. If people can’t trust their own judgement, that’s when all industries become affected and problems, such as longer sales cycles, occur.

## BEST PRACTICES

- **Understand this problem statement to unlock the future of content strategy.** *To regain trust – if we acknowledge that trust is a problem right now – we must empower our audiences. Teach them how to be smart again, how to feel confident to take in new knowledge and trust in their ability to do good research.* This will help people to regain trust, which brings the discussion full circle back to the idea of authority. Marketing is a form of authority. Brands that teach consumers about their product categories come from a position of authority. Remember, vulnerability offers an opportunity to build rapport. If people are looking inward for answers, marketers can meet them there.
- **Learn where voice, volume and vulnerability intersect.** Use this to empower audiences through the use of content so that brands can help regain consumer trust. When trust is lost, all is lost. These are the same tools that the renaissance letter writers used so well:
  - **Voice.** The distinct personality that manifests both visually and verbally in everything that a brand does. A brand's voice helps to distinguish it from its competitors. It helps its audience to decide which brand best aligns with their needs. It also helps to humanize the brand and elevate what's most important to the brand, which identifies with the needs and beliefs of its audience.
    - Changing a brand's voice for new product offerings can be dangerous. It runs the risk of alienating the brand's original audience. Use a consistent voice to roll out new products and do it with plain language in order to help consumers maintain their confidence in not only the brand, but also in their own knowledge of where the brand is headed.
      - For example, Mailchimp evolved its voice over time. They started out as a small business serving other small businesses. As the brand matured and offered more services, they made a point not to alienate their existing customers. They maintained their original voice and brand. Copy remained in the first person, but now the tone is more robust. They vary their tone depending on the context. They maintained their original yellow branding, but they've also evolved their illustration style to become more nuanced. It's not just Freddie the Monkey, but now also people. Consumers trust Mailchimp in part because their voice is familiar and consistent. It's not monolithic, but it is consistent and reflects how the brand is maturing.

# BEST PRACTICES

- **Volume.** Volume refers to how much to communicate both in length and level of detail. It's both visual and verbal. It will vary depending on the needs of the audience and the complexity of the information that the brand is trying to convey. Brevity and bullets have largely given way to long-form content, even in e-commerce sites. But that trend isn't a license to babble, either. User research or exit surveys are a good way to help brands decide on the appropriate amount of content. Enough detail has been offered when an audience is able to make decisions and feel good about those decisions. Measuring the rate of return, length of time in a shopping cart, etc. are different ways to monitor this metric.
  - A good example of this is America's Test Kitchen. They offer the right level of detail and the right amount of content for their customer's mindset, channel and device for each use case. When novice chefs or advanced chefs look for recipes, they have access to vast amounts of content. However, it is always optimized for specific reading and use cases.
  - Crutchfield is another good example. They sell cameras and lenses, so their audience wants lots of content. Therefore, the brand invests in education because they know that education drives empowerment. Empowerment drives confidence and confidence drives trust.
  - On the flip side, there is such a thing as too much content. Gov.uk is the site that serves its British citizens. It had 9 different websites. However, for official stance on certain government services, people were turning to the newspapers vs. the government sites. Going to the sites was a nightmare; too much information. After some user research, Gov.uk came to the conclusion that they should only publish information on those elements that only the government could address. This meant fewer topics. With that type of content auditing process, they were able to cull their content, consolidate it and bring it from 75,000 pages to 3,000. With fewer pages to curate and maintain, the sites were more efficient and they were able to reduce costs considerably.

# BEST PRACTICES

- ***Vulnerability.*** Individually, a consistent voice and the appropriate volume are characteristics of good, brand-driven content strategy and user-centered design. It's through operationalizing vulnerability that efforts in voice and volume unite better to foster trust. That means risking criticism and ridicule because the brand is revealing hard truths and challenges that it experiences within its organization. However, to make the brand vulnerable and build rapport, it's necessary to engage in that kind of transparency. Vulnerability is not weakness. The smartest brands grow stronger by owning their mistakes, sharing more about who they are and what they believe in. By operationalizing vulnerability, the brand is exposed to risk in the hope of reaping greater rewards. Those rewards are increased loyalty, brand champions and a highly engaged community.
  - A good example of vulnerability is Penzey's Spices. The owner of the company is known for taking political stances. They are pro-immigration, for instance. His statements are true to the company's values, one of which is that a love of cooking transcends borders. They've put a stake in the ground and said that this is what their brand stands for. They risked alienation of some customers, but earned the attention of others who align with the same values. When you are a company that puts yourself out there, you can find a stronger community.





# BEST PRACTICES

- **Recognize that a brand is most vulnerable when it messes up.** The brand faces its greatest risk in the aftermath. It can either double down on the defeat or embrace it as an opportunity. To embrace it, follow these steps:
  - Communicate quickly. Update if necessary.
  - Take responsibility in the first person.
  - Accurately and completely explain the errors.
  - Detail what you will do to solve the problems.
    - Zoom is a very recent example of vulnerability. Zoom had about 10 million daily business customers. As the world responded to COVID-19, March 2020 has seen daily usage exceed 200 million participants – and not just business users. This left the platform open to viruses and security breaches. Eric Yuan – Zoom’s CEO – didn’t call out blame or stoke anger. On April 1<sup>st</sup> he instead wrote a blog post in which he apologized in the first person. He explained what happened and offered details that demonstrated respect for its audience’s intelligence. He then followed that up with a plan to hold himself accountable for a resolution. His response was swift, specific and transparent. It’s a powerful case study in earning trust while confronting trouble.

# RESOURCES

- Kelly asked participants to share their relationship with content in their organizational roles:
  - One participant has a federal charge to produce, archive, disseminate information and train across the nation for stakeholders who work on behalf of a vulnerable sector of the population.
  - Another participant is trying to re-imagine how to turn a 3-day conference event that may not happen now into a 6 month content series.
    - Kelly added that many people are in a similar situation in that they have to translate content and make it fit into something that was in person or had other mediums that don't exist currently. This collaboration with content is shifting and has shifted.
  - Yet another member is trying to get a new marketing team more involved in creating a content plan for community that ties into all the company's other communication channels.
  - Lastly, another participation is currently trying to work through strategy on curation and archiving community content

# RESOURCES

- As mentioned in the chat – Margot’s book – “*Content Strategy at Work: Real-world Stories to Strengthen Every Interactive Project*”:  
<https://www.amazon.com/Content-Strategy-Work-Real-world-Interactive/dp/0123919223/>