

betting **big**

Major brands are taking risky gambles on content marketing—and hitting the jackpot in the process.



BY MATT ALDERTON

It can be fun, and even a learning experience, to watch how the whales gamble.

Every week, millions of people play Powerball, a multistate lottery that awards an average jackpot of \$255 million. The odds of winning are 1 in 175 million—less than those of being injured by a toilet, getting killed by a shark or becoming president of the United States, which are 1 in 10,000, 1 in 3.7 million and 1 in 10 million, respectively.

Still, people keep playing, daydreaming about how they might spend their winnings. If they won big, 64 percent of Americans said they'd continue to live frugally, according to a 2012 survey by savings website CouponCabin. The other 36 percent, presumably, would splurge. Among the items on survey respondents' wish lists were an extreme home makeover, a maid, daily services from a hairdresser and masseuse, a chauffeur, a trip to Disney World, an RV and a Steinway D Concert Grand piano.

Content marketers often find themselves meandering through similar daydreams. If money were no object, they muse, what could they do, and what could they achieve?

Because a growing number of brands are making large content marketing investments, they no longer have to wonder. They can see for themselves what their marketing department could do with a windfall.

"A lot of big brands are making big bets on content marketing," says Robert Rose, chief strategist at the Content Marketing Institute, whose *2014 Benchmarks, Budgets, and Trends* research series found that 60 percent of B2C marketers and 58 percent of B2B marketers plan to increase their content marketing budgets this year. "They are trying some really innovative, experimental things. Some of it is working. Some of it isn't. But all of it is really interesting."

And really big. If not in investment, then certainly in ideas—the scale of which seems to be swelling like a river full with rain.

"People today have too many options for consuming media," says Justin Charlton-Perrin, creative director of video, digital and social content at Imagination. "Back in the day, when there were basically just three network television stations, advertisements were a necessary evil. You had to watch them. Now, we absolutely don't. People nowadays have to elect to consume your message, and the only way to get them to do that is to tell them a really good story."

WHALE WATCHING

Most casinos have a high-limit room where gamblers can wager ungodly sums of money. In the gaming industry, these high rollers are known as "whales." And for the average Joe or Jane, it can be fun, and even a learning experience, to watch how the whales gamble.

Content marketers can similarly engage in "whale watching." Even if they can't afford to play in the high-limit room of content marketing, they can be inspired by brands that do. And, in so doing, they can push themselves beyond their comfort zone in pursuit of big wins.

Three whales that play the game particularly well are:

1. Lego

In February, Danish toy manufacturer The Lego Group partnered with Warner Bros. to release *The Lego Movie*, a computer-animated feature film that tells the story of an ordinary Lego construction worker who saves the Lego universe from an evil businessman who wants to permanently "freeze" it in place with a tube of Krazy Glue. The film cost \$60 million to make but earned \$468 million at the box office.

Although the high production quality is undeniable, the film didn't succeed because it was expensive. It succeeded because it was good. In fact, the popular movie review website Rotten Tomatoes reports that *The Lego Movie* received a 95 percent approval rating from critics.

"*The Lego Movie* is a product movie, and it's probably going to win an Academy Award," Rose says. "That in itself is mind-blowing. But to me, the real genius of *The Lego Movie* is the content marketing lesson: Lego recognizes that it's only as successful as the imaginations of the kids who play with its products. By showing what's possible with Lego, this film fuels its audience's imaginations so that they leave the theater wanting to go home and build a Lego world of their own. It's one giant expression of what your imagination can build."

2. Chipotle

In September 2013, Mexican-food chain Chipotle released *The Scarecrow*, an animated short film about a scarecrow who works at a food manufacturing plant owned by the fictitious Crow Foods Inc. During the 3-minute, 22-second film, the scarecrow goes about his workday at the factory. There, an assembly line packages a product labeled "100% Beef-ish," robotic crows inject chickens with fluid to make them plump and cows in metal boxes tremble in fear. Finally, the scarecrow returns to his home on a farm, where he has the novel idea to start a burrito stand in the city using fresh vegetables harvested from his garden. The film's final shot is of a banner above the scarecrow's burrito stand, which reads, "Cultivate a Better World."

In February, Chipotle succeeded this short with *Farmed and Dangerous*, an original comedy series satirizing the world of industrial agriculture. During four half-hour episodes that comprise the show's first season, the fictional company Animoil introduces PetroPellet, a petroleum-based animal feed that it claims will reduce agriculture's dependence on oil. When it's discovered that the feed makes cows explode, however, the company must go to absurd lengths to protect its image.

Although it's unclear whether Chipotle has sold more burritos, it's definitely attracted an audience: *The Scarecrow*, which aired on YouTube, has received more than 13 million views to date. *Farmed and Dangerous*—which aired on the streaming-TV service Hulu and cost \$1 million to produce—has received 44,000 "likes" on Facebook and an average user rating of four out of five stars.

"The benefit of this kind of storytelling is that it helps you build an emotional connection with your audience so that people are more willing to hear from you through other channels," Rose says. "If Chipotle creates an aggregated audience that appreciates its perspective on the world—in this case, how healthy food is created—they're more willing to hear from the company when it says, 'Here's a 10 percent-off coupon for a burrito.'"

3. Net-A-Porter

Films and TV series aren't the only gambles content marketers are making. In February, for instance, online retailer Net-A-Porter launched *Porter*, a bimonthly fashion magazine à la *Vogue*.



Most branded magazines are written by committee within a marketing department, then distributed for free directly to existing customers. Not *Porter*. Instead, it's sold to the general public on newsstands alongside magazines like *Elle*, *Cosmopolitan* and *Vanity Fair*. Like its newsstand neighbors, it's printed on nearly 300 pages of glossy paper and features famous cover models shot by noted photographers—not to mention paid advertising, original photo spreads, interviews with celebrities, articles written by award-winning journalists and a big-name editor-in-chief: Lucy Yeomans, formerly of the British *Harper's Bazaar*.

Porter—which has a circulation of approximately 100,000 across 60 countries—is successful, Charlton-Perrin says, because it has more in common with a fashion magazine than a branded magazine. When someone reads the former, it's because they sought it out; they bought it at the supermarket, they purchased a subscription or they borrowed it from a friend. When someone reads the latter, it's because it sought *them* out; it came in the mail, unsolicited, like a catalog, which is exactly how it's treated.

"If Net-A-Porter came out with a quarterly magazine that didn't compete on the same level with *Vogue* or *Elle*, it would be viewed almost like a circular," Charlton-Perrin says. "The quality of the product is part and parcel with the objective."

As much as *Porter* succeeds in spite of its brand sponsorship, it also succeeds because of it: Because it's not just content, but rather content marketing, it offers direct access to the purchase funnel, which adds value that *Vogue* and *Elle* lack.

"If I'm reading *Vogue*, I may see all kinds of amazing stuff, but I either don't know where to go to get it, or I have to do a little digging to find out," Charlton-Perrin says. "When I'm reading *Porter*, it's a one-stop shop. I'm getting the same content I would get in *Vogue*, but I'm already in the purchase funnel. When I see something I want, I know exactly where to get it. It's a brilliant extension of shopper, or in-store marketing."

HOW WINNERS PLAY

Marketers who can't afford to produce blockbuster films and 300-page magazines might feel disadvantaged. But the truth is, even small bets can win big jackpots. Instead of wishing they had big brands' budgets, content marketers should focus their energy on emulating big brands' strategies, according to Rose and Charlton-Perrin, who offer the following tips:

1. Deliver value. The best content can stand on its own merits because it delivers value that's distinct from the brand publishing it. "Chipotle's TV series isn't about Chipotle at all; it's about how sustainable farming produces better food than factories," explains Rose, who says "value" can take many forms, including education, awareness or even entertainment. "They understand that content itself delivers value beyond their product or service."

2. Share strategically. Brands like Chipotle and Net-A-Porter are succeeding not because they offer something for everyone, but rather because they offer everything for someone. That is, they know who their biggest fans are, and they create content those fans will love, knowing they'll share it with people the brand hasn't yet reached.

"Along with a really great story, you have to have a really great strategy for distributing it," Charlton-Perrin says. "If you just chuck your story out there, no one's going to pay attention to it. But if you tell it in a way that appeals to the right people, and distribute it to them at the right time and in the right place, they're going to do millions of dollars' worth of heavy lifting for you by passing it around."

3. Be strategic. Content must be a strategic means to a business end. *The Lego Movie*, for instance, promotes teamwork and imagination—values that make

In Action: U.S. Army Turns Gamers Into Soldiers

Soldiers might not gamble. They do, however, take calculated risks, which is exactly what the U.S. Army did in July 2002 when it launched *America's Army*, a first-person computer game that gives civilians an inside look at military technology and mission sets.

"In the *America's Army* game, players are bound by rules of engagement as they take part in multiplayer, force-on-force operations," explains Marsha Berry, the game's director of product development. "It reflects the bedrocks of soldiering to include adherence to Army values, the importance of training and individual development, as well as the necessity of teamwork and leadership."

Since its launch more than a decade ago, the original *America's Army* game has spawned dozens of subsequent versions and numerous spinoffs, not to mention a digital comic book series.

"The free *America's Army* comics series lets readers further explore the storyline and delve deeper into character plots of soldiers' lives when deployed or at home," Berry says. "Readers learn about soldiers and the missions they do, their values, their jobs or military occupational specialties, the high-tech equipment and gear they use,

and the vast network of support on which they rely."

By telling a compelling story—from the barracks to the battlefield—the games and comics help the Army achieve one of its most important strategic objectives: recruiting the next generation of soldiers.

"As the Army continues to transform, the demand for technologically savvy young Americans who can make decisions in an information-dense environment is growing dramatically in the Army. Therefore, the Army must meet young Americans where they spend their time and attention," explains Berry, who says more than 14 million people have played *America's Army* games, collectively spending more than 260 million hours in game play. "In the past, this meant communicating through television and other mass media. Today, this increasingly means providing tailored

communication via the Internet that is both entertaining and relevant to individuals."

Meeting one's audience members where they are is a lesson *America's Army* can teach content marketers. Another is the importance of authenticity. "All of our products are authentically Army," Berry says. "We have a team of subject matter experts who look at our products to make sure everything is as it is in the U.S. Army. As a result, we have gained a strong reputation

with our fans for 'getting it right.'"

And for getting it *first*. "Don't be afraid to jump into new grounds," Berry advises. "When we debuted the game in 2002, everyone was asking, 'What is the Army doing in the games business?' Then, once companies saw the successes we were having, 'advergaming' and serious gaming became an extremely popular and effective marketing tool for reaching target audiences."



children more receptive to playing with Lego products. *Farmed and Dangerous*, meanwhile, educates consumers about food manufacturing, which makes them more likely to choose Chipotle. "Brands like Lego and Chipotle aren't creating content just to be fun and entertaining," Rose says. "They're delivering content that actually furthers their business in some way."

4. Think differently. *The Lego Movie* wasn't just big; it was original. "Brands have to have an open mind," Charlton-Perrin says. "There's a tendency to say, 'I don't want to take any chances; give me what they've got over there.' But what they've got over there has already been done. Nine times out of 10, the brand that breaks through is the brand that does it first."

5. Build emotional equity. Whether it's in the form of a feature film or an interesting article, compelling stories create emotional connections with consumers that make them more receptive to traditional marketing down the road.

"The more you can fill the well of engagement with emotions, the less you have to spend on direct marketing in order to get them to do something you want them to do," Rose says.

The most important tip of all is perhaps the simplest: Don't make bad content—because bad content is a bad bet. ■

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