Marketing to Contractors 101: Getting Through the Noise to New Clients

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Marketing has perhaps never appeared more complicated, especially to those outside the trade. There’s SEM, SEO, inbound and content marketing, in addition to traditional direct marketing, brand advertising and public relations. Small businesses and firms want to get in front of the contractors who could benefit from their expertise, but getting any advantage can feel impossible without a completely new toolbox. And finding help can be a challenge.

If you ask Google for guidance, you see part of the problem: thousands of results vying for your attention. Contractors are flooded with content, emails, advertising and messaging all day, every day, just like you are. The real trick, then, isn’t marketing; it’s getting through the noise with something worth listening to, and with the expertise CPAs have, every firm is equipped to do this. In that light, marketing to contractors is simple for CPAs: Give your audience value. Then they’ll see your value.

How to Be Worth Hearing

Delivering value to contractors that gets their attention for your firm does require strategy, but we can chart this in a few steps. It begins by identifying who your audience is that you want to build. From there, it’s about identifying what that audience actually finds valuable and what content you might be able to provide. Next, firms need to determine how they can effectively deliver this content and, finally, how they can nurture the relationships they create. When these pieces come together, you have a basic marketing strategy you can learn from and develop.

1. Building Your Audience

Just like a consultation or conversation, every attempt to reach a contractor is itself communication, which means it’s addressing an audience. These conversations aren’t all the same, because no audience is ever truly homogenous or anonymous. Identifying who you’re addressing, then, uses an important marketing tool called a persona.

A buyer persona is a character profile that represents a group you’re trying to address. In one sense, these personae might be broad generalizations about what your client base looks like. However, these characters actually remind us that the people who get our e-letters and visit our websites are real people with real pain points, preferences, hobbies and even favorite TV shows.

Pat, for example, is a self-employed home renovator in his 30s. He subcontracts labor on some of his jobs and with a consistently healthy backlog is on the verge of retaining his first full-time employees. The biggest thing holding him back is frankly a lack of business acumen, which he doesn’t really have the time or patience to acquire, so he does his best to keep paper receipts together in a folder and check on his bank balance. He’s also not a real person, but Pat easily could be any number of contractors—and if I try to engage him, I have a shot at the attention of contractors who have those concerns and interests.

Beginning to build a persona is as simple asking who, what, when and why.
Who Are They?

First, identify who you want to address. What makes them more than “just a contractor”? Identify what type of work their company does, as well as their role in the company—both in terms of title and influence. What are their working and communication preferences, as well as their demographics and generation? You might also create additional personae, beyond your potential client audience, for influencers who can help carry your brand and reach contractors.

What Do They Need?

It’s tempting simply to say they need your services. Stepping back to assess what the persona is looking for, however, is also asking empathetically what they think they need, a lot of which may appear to be unrelated to business. Pat wants to work on houses during the day, enjoy his family in the evening and go to the lake on the weekend. The reality is, all of this can be relevant to how I address him, because it’s relevant to who he is.

When Are They Acting?

This question is about the decision-making process or “funnel.” A sales funnel would model how potential clients tend to move from awareness of services at the top of the funnel, filter through interest and evaluation, and eventually take action. Each stage of that journey might have different questions and concerns. For example, how I’d address the desires of someone who’s evaluating which firm they want to work with might be different from how I’d address the desires of someone who’s unsure what “CPA” even stands for.

Why Don’t They Have It?

If the idea is that contractors need a solution you have, why don’t they have it yet? Identify the obstacle. Is it just lack of information, or is there actually some misinformation that creates the biggest barrier? Are they stuck with a bad solution, or do they lack access to an important resource? Are they just resistant to change, and if so, why? These obstacles might not be the same for each persona you identify.

As much as possible, it’s important to source information for your persona profiles from the people they represent, not conventional wisdom or intuition alone. Spend time with contractors, or at least reflect on recent conversations you’ve had.

Finally, nothing helps instill empathy like a name and a face. Part of rounding out a persona is giving them a relatable, individual identity. You might even pull a stock photo as a reminder that each persona represents real people, rather than abstract roles.

2. Creating Their Content

Good marketing begins with the audience because articles, podcasts and ads that no one wants get no one’s attention and do nothing for your firm. Some blogs might say websites need to post every week in order to show up high in Google search results, but if no one reads your blog, it’s all work with no benefit.

Everything depends on what your audience wants to see and share, rather than what we want to say. This is the big idea behind the shift from “brand marketing,” which promotes the product directly, to “content marketing,” where promotion centers on audience-driven content. As a result, it’s now less about how to persuade them to listen; instead, it’s about what our audience wants to consume anyway and how we can be the ones to provide it in ways that leave our mark.
What Contractors Want

Getting inside of the heads of your audience to deliver the content they’ll pay attention to isn’t easy, but there are several angles to approach from.

1. Answer the Question

Every Google search is a question looking for an answer, and search engines do their best to connect searchers to the people who can answer that question. Fortunately, a lot of questions either remain unanswered on the internet or could be answered more satisfactorily. That means if you can provide content that delivers, sites like Google have a vested interest in putting your website directly in front of people.

Marcus Sheridan, better known as “the Pool Guy,” helped make this “They Ask, You Answer” strategy famous when his swimming pool company started dominating search results and grew exponentially through the Great Recession. He did this largely just by creating webpages that contained what people were already searching for. As soon as he began answering simple questions like “How much does a fiberglass pool cost?” and “What problems do fiberglass pools have?” people found his website. Because he offered information consumers couldn’t find anywhere else, they wanted to do business with a company they saw as helpful and trustworthy.

Of course the best way to discover what answers contractors are looking for is to talk with them, but there are very basic alternatives you can use. The first is Google. Search engines can uncover popular search terms (phrases that searchers enter into Google) with the help of Google’s auto-suggest function when you begin typing in the search field, plus related searches at the bottom. Some free and paid tools, like answerthepublic.com, aggregate these suggestions for even more content ideas. Finally, popular questions can also be found posted on social sites like forums and Reddit.

2. Be Engaging

When thinking about content contractors want to see, some content is simply engaging, whoever the audience is. It’s the compelling interviews we want to hear about overcoming challenges and the funny YouTube videos we want to click on. It’s entertaining, it tells a story and there are a million forms it can take. Again, the question isn’t how I can reach contractors with my message but how I can engage contractors where they are.

Each week, the cast of the “ConTechCrew” hosts a one-hour podcast, where they review the latest construction headlines and interview a guest. The conversation isn’t about their products, and it can even veer off construction topics. The point is that it captures an audience from across the industry because they talk about what’s interesting to people in construction. As a result, they draw listeners to their site, where contractors can find out more when they’re ready, when they feel like they have a sense of whom they’d be doing business with.

Occasionally, we can take queues from analogues. An analogue looks at what else a persona likes and what they like about it. You could say that a construction podcast works to the extent that subscribers enjoy listening to talk radio and podcasts outside of construction. It capitalizes on what already has appeal. To be really creative, then, a CPA firm could ask what they might be able to learn from products like the NFL and how it engages contractors successfully.

3. Be Human

A lot of what contractors want to read, see and engage with is the same as anyone else. At the end of the day, most construction business owners, controllers and project executives watch the same TV commercials, laugh at the same jokes and visit the same grocery stores. Each persona will have distinctive traits, but all of us share too much in common to think contractors only respond to things native to construction.

If your firm has a good story to tell that you enjoy hearing, there’s a good chance potential clients will find value in it as well. If they value it, they’ll pay attention. When deciding if something has broad appeal, though, be
careful not to view it with your company lenses instead of your human lenses. A story isn’t interesting just because it happened to me, and firms need to make sure that content about their company would be interesting even if it was about someone else.

**How Contractors Want It**

Technology thinker Marshall McLuhan famously said, “The medium is the message,” meaning what we communicate can’t be separated from how we communicate it. That also means that everything we share has a medium (i.e., a form it’s communicated in), so we have to think of the form and the method we use to deliver it. That method also includes what we can call a “channel,” or a particular avenue for communication. Today, there are numerous media and channels for content, and they impact its value for your audience.

1. **Congratulations, You’re a Media Company**

   In an age where almost every business has a website and many have a blog, you control content, and that makes you a media publisher. The question is what media you’re going to take advantage of in order to engage your audience of contractors.

   Educational content about how contractors can prepare for quarterly taxes can take the medium of an article or an informal blog, but it can also be a video, an audio podcast, an infographic — even an Instagram story or a game for smartphones! As easy of a solution blogging might appear to be, or as exciting as new media might be, the same rule applies. It has to be valuable to the people represented by your personae.

   Each medium has advantages, but it depends on whom you’re addressing. If one persona is a busy, self-educated contractor, they probably aren’t looking for a technical white paper on tax planning. If they’re a Gen Xer or Millennial, you might want to make sure that the content is easy to access on a mobile device. If it doesn’t have convenience, it doesn’t have value, and if it doesn’t have value, it doesn’t help your company.

2. **Change the Channel**

   A content medium still needs a channel to share it. The difference between a medium and a channel is like the difference between a package and FedEx or between an article and the website that publishes. So even though a medium helps determine the channel you use, there’s still a need to choose and strategize. A blog post, for example, could be published on your firm’s website, on a third-party blog publisher like Medium, or guest-posted on a partner’s site to get in front of a new audience. It can also be pushed through social media, shared on an industry forum and sent out in an email campaign.

   Just like media decisions, the choice of channels comes back again to who your audience is and what engages them effectively. Not every business has to be on every social media site, and if they don’t have a strategy for building and addressing a following on one, they may see even more benefit by being strategically absent from certain places.

   An additional consideration, however, is how much control each channel gives you over your content. Hosting a blog or videos on your firm’s website or delivering content to subscribers in an e-letter keeps full ownership in-house. It also allows you to update content, take it down, and direct people to forms or contact points to capture leads. Second-tier channels like LinkedIn and YouTube, or third-tier channels like partner websites, can help amplify your content but reduce your control and copyright. They also tend to create distance between your audience and the rest of your lead-generating converting content, which should live in the first tier.

   Typically, the goal of channels further outside of your control is to draw people toward channels you own — first and foremost, your firm’s website. As a rough analogy, you can meet clients at a coffee shop and buy them a latte, but if you’re able to bring them in to your offices, you can make them comfortable, tour them around and give them the experience you both want them to have. That requires having a website with a good experience, where it’s easy to find the content they’re looking for and that you want them to find, including clear next steps in dynamic
calls to action like “Call us today for tax answers.”

The reward for a well-built website is that people want to spend time there, as long as they can continue to find what they want the way they want it. Search engines reward this as well, which is why search-engine optimization (SEO) experts consistently say that the most important ranking factor on results pages is the quality of content. This helps contractors find your value, attribute trustworthiness and gain comfort so that they’re willing to follow the next step of becoming a client.

3. Nurturing Their Trust

Despite everything that’s changed about marketing after 20 years of Google, bringing clients on board is still a process of nurturing the relationship. The fuel of that relationship is trust. Identifying an audience and creating content is all meant for this purpose.

If we go back to the analogy of hosting a potential client at your offices, you wouldn’t just give them the address, leave the door open for them and let them wander around past the reception area until they find you. That would be a terrible experience. Instead, visits are planned — you might say, designed — based on where they are in the relationship, what they want to see and what you want to show them. Every marketing touch point creates this experience, and if it’s coordinated, it’s a positive one.

It starts with getting found.

1. Get Found: Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

In many ways, SEO today is actually simpler than ever. Search engines like Google are becoming exponentially more intelligent and better at following a single prime directive: give searchers what they want. While there are countless best practices from basic to advanced, no technique is as important as having good web pages that contain what people are searching for. It’s not unusual to find a website that lacks traditional “optimization” best practices — old, clunky websites or pages that use an important keyword only a couple times — sitting at the top of search results, because nothing matters to Google as much as content.

Each piece of content has an opportunity to be found on a search engine if it matches a searcher’s “intent.” An intent is more than a keyword; it’s what the searcher wants when they input a search query. Two main types are transactional queries (e.g., “Pawtucket succession planning”) and informational queries (e.g., “succession planning process”). Both searchers are using the same root keyword, “succession planning,” but they’re looking for different things. One probably wants to see search results of Pawtucket-area firms that can advise them, while the other probably wants to learn about the process.

Matching intent on your website is as important as bringing a potential client into the right conversation at the right time. To capitalize on a transactional query like “Pawtucket succession planning,” a Rhode Island CPA firm will want a webpage that addresses that intent better than everyone else. If that content gives an overview of succession planning services, explains what new clients can expect, and provides a convenient way to get the ball rolling, searchers can be gently led to providing their contact information or reaching out directly.

On the other hand, if the webpage just has information but no clear path to getting these services, a transactional searcher will probably hit the back button and look elsewhere. The same is true in reverse. If an informational searcher can only find brief sales content about your services when they really want to learn about what succession planning strategies even are, they won’t be happy, and neither will search engines.

Search engines will work to match your website content with a searcher’s intent, but if it finds too many people are going back to the results page because they’re not finding what they’re looking for, the search engine will stop showing it for that query. As a result, the firm in this example might want to have a page designated to address each intent around “succession planning.” A wider net catches more fish.
2. Invite Them Back: Email Marketing

Having been found online, firms can continue to stay in front of contractors by building an addressable audience they can nurture into a client relationship. That means growing the all-important contact list — but doing it with the same mindset that attracted people to the content they wanted in the first place.

Most people don’t like giving away their information, so there has to be value in it for them. Enough good, timely, trust-building content can lead a contractor to comfortably fill out a form to be contacted for the next step. However, leads can also be captured even earlier in exchange for high-value content like an e-book or webinar. This “gated content” sits behind a lead form, where it’s accessed only after providing contact information.

Firms need to be careful not to overuse gating, however. Putting too much of your best, most helpful content behind a form can end up hiding it from search engines and the potential clients you really want to see it. A website that overpromises on a “white paper” that turns out to be a one-page PDF may also lose some trust they’re trying to build.

An alternative to gated content is simply promising upfront what you’re going to use their email address for: sending them excellent content — and then doing it. A subscription e-letter, whether it contains multiple articles and curated blog posts or one podcast episode at a time, is a way of making sure they continue to see the value of the expertise and help you offer without them having to return to check your website again and again.

Depending on what information you’re able to acquire, firms can also segment their lists in order to make more targeted appeals to particular audiences they’ve identified — by role, trade or relationship. Marketing automation software can set up “drip” email campaigns, which space out a specific sequence of emails over time based on whether a recipient opens or clicks on an email so they can be given the appropriate next step. Often these will begin with a small call to action, like reading a relevant article, and aim to gradually warm up the recipient to taking a larger step later, like registering for a seminar.

Whatever email marketing methods firms use, each touch point has the opportunity to continue building trust and reputation and can make a gentle appeal to take another step in the relationship.

3. Seal the Deal: Personal Touch

For as much as web presence, SEO and marketing automation can do to nurture a relationship, they’ll never be a substitute for the personal touch that actually brings a contractor through the doors and keeps them coming back. At a certain point, the next call to action is a phone call, and eventually we want that accrued trust to translate to a face-to-face conversation. Contractors need a smooth transition from their search query to viewing your content, and they need a smooth transition to onboarding.

This is an area where firms really have their own expertise, and primarily they just need to make sure they integrate what they already do successfully to nurture relationships personally and onboard clients with the rest of their marketing strategy. One way to help do this is to make sure the human face is always showing through in the content and communication by writing with personality that reveals a bit about the people behind the firm. Often, identifying who specifically someone will be working with when they agree to be contacted or are asked to reach out, for example, will make people more comfortable and more inclined to click the button or pick up the phone.

If contractors experience that the connection between the information they want and the information a company offers, and between the company’s marketing face and its human face, is truly seamless, they’ve found a value they won’t easily forget. That’s when people feel taken care of and like they can trust you to take care of them when a lot more is at stake.
4. Beginning Your Plan

All of these pieces are just the beginning of an inbound or content marketing plan, but it’s not a plan if it’s not documented, and it won’t develop if it’s not put to work. Once written out, audience personae should be communicated with everyone who will be part of the marketing effort — from blog contributors to webinar presenters to firm leaders. Just as important is documenting what content will be created, how it will be used on which channels, and how they might work to lead contractors on a journey to being clients. Finally, however basic or detailed that plan is, schedule a definite time to review it in the future.

Just as contractors often need to begin job costing with basic structures and broad strokes before getting granular, marketing to contractors in a noisy age simply requires that you start somewhere thoughtfully. That “somewhere” is with an identified audience, helpful and engaging content contractors are looking for, and a plan for bringing them in close. However complex your marketing strategy gets from there, it always rests on this simple principle: give contractors value, and they’ll see your value.