



Smart Content as a Driver of Customer Experience

Our latest report analyzes trends in consumer engagement with product and help content and the effects that this engagement has on companies' customer experience initiatives. Our aim is to help companies understand why product and help content make up a critical, but oft overlooked, part of the customer experience.

There's a fundamental gap between the way companies treat this content and the needs and demands of consumers and customers. To understand this gap, we analyze three central aspects of the current economic landscape.

1. We live in a customer experience-based economy. Increasingly, consumers differentiate between brands by their experiences outside of traditional marketing channels. They're seeking a more authentic sense of what it's like to be a customer before they buy. With dwindling customer loyalty, ensuring a top-notch customer experience across the entire customer journey is crucial to maintaining a competitive edge.

2. This is the age of on-demand understanding. The prevalence of mobile technology and the Internet of Things in consumers' everyday lives has changed the way they approach product and help content. This content increasingly plays a role in research, purchase decisions, and customer success, and consumers prefer self-service to other service channels. Companies with easily discoverable content drive more brand engagement.

3. Your content is now your customer experience. As consumer patience for older channels wanes, self-service channels become the front line of customer experience initiatives from researching to renewal. Addressing how this content is presented and how consumers engage with it is a critical part of any modern customer experience initiative.

Ultimately, we argue that to address these emerging trends, companies need to adopt a content strategy that deploys smart content across the customer journey. PDFs and FAQs do not provide the user experience expected by modern consumers, and they do not have intelligible metrics to provide leadership strategic insights. Smart content addresses these deficiencies, and more.

Companies can help break the cycle of poor customer experiences by taking their product and help content into the 21st century. This whitepaper will help readers understand the customer needs addressed by introducing smart content throughout the customer journey in order to differentiate their brands in an increasingly competitive economy.

How do you find content right now?



This is the problem smart content solves.

The Makeup of Smart Content

The average American interacts with customer service an average of 65 times per year, which is more than five times per month.¹ And by almost every measurement, the majority of customers are most likely doing so online and particularly through their mobile devices: they want self-service.² Content is the best way to reach the consumer, and to create customer experiences that promote self-service and thus brand engagement, companies must first optimize the delivery of the content their customers are looking for. This refers to not only ensuring easy, effective accessibility through either medium, but the usability of the content itself (see box, page 4).

The industry is moving away from older, slower technologies and toward systems that are more usable, flexible, and agile. The common data model DITA is also semantically rich, topic-level content that's structured, but is notoriously difficult to implement. Smart content takes it to the next level: it has the same components in terms of structure and architecture without the older, slower XML and XSLT technologies.

“Semantic structure” is an organization created in a way that allows others to infer meaning from its contents.

Smart content's semantic structure organizes microcontent in a way that complements the brain's propensity to separate content into smaller pieces and arrange it into mental folders, sub-folders, and sub-sub-folders.³ Humans excel at absorbing information but only if they can break it down.⁴ The basic term “microcontent” came from the intention to provide an easier way for people to learn: the concept was to create succinct pieces of content a person can read and digest quickly and remember for a longer period of time. In the same way Darwin Information Typing Architecture (DITA) is in part an homage to Darwin's theory of evolution, building on the concept of heredity, smart content is to this concept of “chunking” in cognitive psychology. What the mind does naturally when ingesting information particularly in large quantities is automatically segment it into small bits, classify those and chunk them together, and encode them for storage in one's memory.⁵ This is how our brains turn information into knowledge.⁶

Principles of Usability

The magnitude of available data in general has exploded to such an extent that the average human's ability to learn from it has not kept up. When it comes to the customer experience therefore, which is driven principally through content customers access to self-serve, it is not just about the amount of information presented but how a customer can understand and use it. After all, there is a difference between finding an answer and understanding what it means.

Usability and utility of an interface design are paramount in keeping customers from leaving. Usability refers to how easy user interfaces are to use; utility refers to whether the interface provides the needed features. The five features of usability, according to Jakob Nielsen who is an authority on the subject, are:

- Learnability: Ease of accomplishing basic tasks
- Efficiency: How quickly users can perform said tasks
- Memorability: How quickly users can reengage after a period of inactivity
- Errors: Quantity, severity, and remedy of errors users ultimately make
- Satisfaction: Pleasantness of the interface

While these principles refer to interface design overall, they can certainly relate to content usability as it is presented on a site, whether online or via mobile device:

“If a website is difficult to use, people leave. If the homepage fails to clearly state what a company offers and what users can do on the site, people leave. If users get lost on a website, they leave. If a website's information is hard to read or doesn't answer users' key questions, they leave...There's no such thing as a user reading a website manual or otherwise spending much time trying to figure out an interface...leaving is the first line of defense when users encounter a difficulty.”

The same applies to content accessibility, relevance, usefulness, and speed of delivery. Smart content facilitates all of these through:

- the semantic structure of microcontent, as well as
- the algorithmic restructuring of as-yet unread related content in help center search results.

(continued on next page)

Principles of Usability (continued)

Nielsen even touches on the unlikelihood of customers taking the time to read a manual to solve their problem, reinforcing the value of microcontent in resolving difficulty through easy-to-digest small bits of information customers can access on demand. Microcontent is also more easily disseminated online than user manuals in pre-internet files or PDFs and able to achieve better rankings in search engine result pages (SERPs), due to search engines' preference for relevant, topic-level articles (see page 6).

Sources: Jakob Nielsen, [Usability 101: Introduction to Usability](#), Nielsen Norman Group, January 4, 2012; Charles Duhigg, [Smarter Faster Better: The Secrets of Being Productive in Life and Business](#) (London: Random House Publishing Group), March 8, 2016, pp. 397–401; and Brian Dean, [We Analyzed 1 Million Google Search Results. Here's What We Learned About SEO](#), Backlinko, September 2, 2016; and Lee Fuller, [What Is Microcontent and Why Is It Important?](#) Flaunt Digital, May 9, 2016.

These classified sets of information are stored in “mental scaffolds,” which resemble file cabinets filled with folders and sub-folders that help us keep and access information when needed.⁷ This automatic categorization is part of the basis of smart content, enabling the reader to process and therefore understand the substance of the content, even supporting their ability to recall it later. The result is the opposite of a flat hierarchy, but an intuitive, logical hierarchy that—while structured—can also be easily updated. During a content search, smart content allows the customer to navigate through those folders and sub-folders until he/she arrives at the precise information needed. The hierarchy is what makes the semantic structure of the content effective. The concept of semantic web and the actual, physical structure (the HTML code and the meta data behind it) both tie in to the same goal: that the structure of the page make sense in the site's overall hierarchy. And with the organization and functionality of smart content aligning with how a human processes information, the likelihood that content will resonate with the customer increases.⁸

Flat hierarchy	Structured hierarchy
A	A
B	1
C	2
D	B
	1
	2
	3
	C
	1
	2
Unchunked list	Chunked list
Apples	Fruit
Crackers	Apples
Bread	Bananas
Bananas	Carbs
Mayonnaise	Crackers
Marmalade	Bread
Yogurt	Dairy
Cheese	Milk
Milk	Yogurt
Ketchup	Cheese
	Condiments
	Mayonnaise
	Marmalade
	Ketchup

The semantic structure also makes it easier for search engines to find articles by ascertaining the page's contents to figure out what that article offers, boosting SEO and therefore the chances of that article showing up higher in search engine result pages (SERPs). This is made possible by tags that label the subject matter and components of the content, but also by JSON code that presents information about a page that isn't part of the content itself: a description, category, and other data that is associated with the page. Microcontent also plays into better SEO. By breaking down the bulk of content a company

already produces and offering it in the form of microcontent—short articles that clearly communicate a topic, which is what search engines prefer—smart content can more easily reach customers throughout the customer experience.⁹ The benefits of higher rankings and better SEO are undeniable: “The first law of e-commerce is that if users cannot find the product, they cannot buy it, either.”¹⁰

Life in micro-moments

In addition to accommodating the mind’s tendency to break up large quantities of information into smaller, more digestible bits, microcontent also serves the modern need to consume content in micro-moments. Consumption in general has been driven by the proliferation of mobile

technology innovation and adoption, placing our life experience—therefore the customer experience—into a series of these moments, defined as “those intent-rich moments when people turn to their smartphones or other devices to act on a need: to know, go, do, or buy.”¹¹

92%

of survey respondents say that content is an effective tactic for SEO, with 50% responding *very effective* and 42% responding it is *somewhat effective*.

Source: MarketingSherpa

According to a study released in June 2016, the average user engages in 76 phone sessions per day, with heavy users averaging 132 sessions per day. Marry that with the average user’s 145 minutes spent on their phone per day, heavy users spending 225, and the result is a miniscule average session length: just under two minutes for the average user, and just over a minute and a half for heavy users.¹² Over the years, this micro-moment phenomenon has reinvented the customer journey in terms of demand for relevant, useful

Micro-moments are the new
battleground for brands.

– Google

content fast when customers turn to search engines in those micro-moments—and companies are now obliged to accommodate with instant, accurate results or risk irrelevance.¹³

Traditional content formats are not equipped to do this, rather they create friction points that will divert a customer elsewhere out of frustration and lack of understanding.

Smart content is the next generation of microcontent: its semantic richness in addition to its structure propels delivery, increasing customer satisfaction with their experience. Meeting the modern expectations of on-demand understanding leads to rewards in the form of traffic, brand mentions, and conversions: for example 69% of smartphone users surveyed said they are more likely to buy from a company whose mobile site or app helps them find the answers to their questions easily.¹⁴ Further, 60% of online users say thanks to online research, they make purchasing decisions more quickly than they did a few years ago.¹⁵ Buyers make purchases following a search often within a day, sometimes within the hour.¹⁶

Not just usability, but usefulness

Consumers gravitate toward brands that deliver what they need.¹⁷ Google itself in its analysis of micro-moments stresses these three things:

- Be there: Anticipate the micromoments for your target audience, and commit to being there to help when those moments occur
- Be useful: Provide a digital experience that's relevant to consumers' needs in the moment, and quickly connect people to the answers they're looking for
- Be quick: Accommodate the "need for speed": buyers are often in a hurry, and want to know, go, and buy fast¹⁸

Customers self-serve not only through content searches in Google but surfacing the right content quickly in a company's help center to meet their needs. Another component of smart content is algorithmic restructuring, which refers to the dynamic nature of search results and related articles on a site with the goal of always returning the most useful answers. An article can change position in search results over time based on what users are clicking on as well as the ratings that article is given, i.e., what content customers find useful. Search engines also look at content usefulness when ranking content in search results, in addition to uniqueness and relevance.¹⁹

In terms of recommended content, algorithmic restructuring ensures that relevant, unread content is featured in the related articles section of a page. In a survey published in February 2016, it was found that 47% of B2B consumers viewed three to five pieces of content before engaging with a sales rep, highlighting the importance of giving customers the ability to find and navigate through multiple pieces of content as they research a

product.²⁰ Traditionally, more web pages would have to be created to accommodate different user activity, but the algorithm automatically updates content presentation based on this information. Links are also created automatically, as opposed to having to manually create links for each page. This establishes the authority Google and other search engines are looking for when retrieving content to return search results.²¹

65%

of surveyed smartphone users agree that when conducting a mobile search, they look for the information that is most relevant, regardless of the company providing it.

Source: Think with Google

62%

of surveyed buyers say there is too much content that is not useful (33%) or not relevant (29%)

Source: IDC/IDG Connect via Marketing Interactions

The algorithmic restructuring aspect of smart content can also be related to the way the brain works. As humans consume and learn information, they cross-reference and make connections with their existing knowledge to store the new information in their mental folders, creating learning pathways.²² Actual neural circuits are altered in the brain.²³

Similarly, as users navigate through smart content, their experiences on the site are retained and the algorithm works to advance learning pathways through content delivery. This can potentially lead customers to discovery of new products and services as well.

Analytics of customers' paths through content can enable content creators to identify articles needing updating, raise the profile of other useful content, and pre-determine useful information pathways for different personas based on user activity.

Content interaction data

The user activity that fuels the algorithm is ascertained from user event data—information such as what paths customers traverse in their search for information. Smart content is trackable, unlike PDFs or pre-internet file formats that yield no analytics. Tracking is what allows companies to identify the micro-moments that spur customers' decision making, make their experience frictionless, and adjust content accordingly.²⁴ Smart content is also easily updatable, even by non-experts, whereas XML technology can take months to be updated by programmers at high cost.

Tracking user event data and putting those analytics to work will provide the business intelligence to understand and anticipate the needs of customers, therefore “being there” in their intent-rich micro-moments.²⁵ Doing so is what will advance the quality of the customer experience. In fact, customer analytics has become the principal technology investment for customer experience improvement, dominating the list in a Gartner survey for the last two years.²⁶

Consumer Decision Making

The following are principles of consumer decision making that are important to keep in mind for content strategy, particularly in defining the needs of customers that smart content can fulfill in the I-need-some-ideas micro-moments that make up the research (and ultimately the buy) stage of the customer journey.

- Consumers engage in both internal (memory, personal experiences) and external (outside sources such as websites) information search.
- Low-involvement products (i.e. those that involve minimal effort and do not entail a significant investment) usually involve an internal search, so it is very important that companies achieve “top of mind” awareness.
- For high-involvement products (more expensive items that involve a greater amount of research), consumers are more likely to use an external search.
- Firms that make products that are selected predominantly through external search must invest in having information available to the consumer in need.
- The amount of effort a consumer puts into searching depends on a number of factors such as brands and their competitors in the market; product characteristics, quality, and complexity; and situational characteristics that led to their search.
- Two interesting issues in decisions are:
 - variety seeking, and
 - impulse purchases.

Sources: [Information Search and Decision Making](#), USC Marshall, 2010; [How Shoppers Get Inspiration: Consumer Search Trends in I-Need-Some-Ideas Moments](#), Think with Google, July 2016. and John F. Tanner, Jr. and Mary Anne Raymond, [Principles of Marketing v. 2.0](#), Section 3.2, Flatworld Education, 2011.

At the early stage in the consumer decision journey, a brand's role is to provide inspiration and ideas with content.

– Think with Google

The power of a positive customer experience

The way to understand the micro-moments in customers' lives is to understand the content that matters to them in different stages of the customer journey.²⁷ Micro-moments are driven by customers' intent, and smart content's tracking capability allows companies to learn intent by analyzing what customers are searching for, what content they are engaging out of the search results, and whether that content was useful, among other data.

Google names the following as among the "moments that matter":

- I need to find
- I need some ideas
- Which one is best
- I want to buy it
- I can fix this
- I want to do
- I want to know²⁸

Moments such as these make up the customer journey's research, buy, and succeed stages. Answering those "What's out there," "How does it work," "Will it accomplish what I need," and "I need help with it" queries along that journey is done through a company's content that they are already producing, which if made smart, reaches customers better and faster to create a superior customer experience. This is how companies win in the modern marketplace.

In a survey published in February of 2016, 51% of B2B consumers are relying more on content now to research their buying decisions.²⁹ When customers know they can depend on a brand to help them self-serve with useful content, after having found the exact content quickly that they searched for, they move on with a positive impression of that brand. It is smart content that powers customer engagement and retention.

Now more than ever, content is your customer experience.



About MindTouch

[MindTouch](#) is a leading SaaS solution for customer success/engagement management helping companies create smarter customers to accelerate the sales cycle and drive product adoption. MindTouch not only transforms the product but also helps transform content a company already produces into a customer engagement channel. Users can bring the customer record (CRM) and the customer's self-service behavior together for insight into their experience with their brand. Users can also create a mobile-ready, SEO optimized site for all of a company's content. According to the vendor, MindTouch can help companies double organic web traffic, triple user time on their site, and reduce the bounce rate by 50%.

About the Author

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ENDNOTES

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³ Eric Johnson, Columbia University, in Charles Duhigg, [Smarter Faster Better: The Secrets of Being Productive in Life and Business](#) (London: Random House Publishing Group), March 8, 2016, p. 405.

⁴ Duhigg, [Smarter Faster Better](#), 2016, p. 404.

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⁷ Duhigg, [Smarter Faster Better](#), 2016, p. 404.

⁸ George A. Miller, “[The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two: Some Limits on Our Capacity for Processing Information](#),” *Psychology Review* 63 (Princeton University: Princeton, N.J.), March 1956, pp. 81-97; [Chunking Strategy](#), The Peak Performance Center; and Connie Melamed, [Chunking Information for Instructional Design](#), The eLearning Coach for Designing Smarter Experiences, 2009. Interestingly, this whole operation is related to the Information Processing Theory, which compares the human mind’s approach to processing information to that of an actual computer. This theory has its detractors though as 1) a human obviously incorporates sensory, memory, emotional, and biological response’s to information when categorizing it; 2) humans have the capability to process multiple inputs in parallel as a computer engages in serial/linear processing; and 3) humans and computers have different capability limitations when it comes to amounts of information processing and storage. See Saul McLeod, “[Information Processing](#),” *Simply Psychology*, 2008.

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