

Content Strategy for Professionals: Engaging Audiences for Your Organization

TEXTBOOK

Medill on Media Engagement
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Hampton Press
November 2010

Chapter 2
Media Concepts

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MEDIA CONCEPTS

Bobby J. Calder

Producing journalism or entertainment is a creative act. Nothing to be said here should be taken as denying this. Regardless what form the product takes—an article, program, film, blog, whatever—something is being created. It may be a routine, AP-style story about trends in local traffic problems, but a story still had to be conceived and produced. The aesthetics may be more on display with something like a long piece in *The New Yorker*, but it is always essential. Content will be as good or as bad as the creativity that goes into it. Therefore, the last thing one wants to do with any journalistic or entertainment product is to curtail creativity.

The primacy of creativity, of course, raises the question of “creative control.” Should content producers be left alone to practice their art or should other factors, such as management objectives or consumer feedback, be considered? The question is the stuff of long-time debates and tensions in media organizations. Even the reporter with the local traffic story does not like to be edited, much less feel that a story was altered for “business reasons.”

There is more here than just the usual control issues, however. The production of creative content is not just mysterious, but strange. As the philosopher John Dewey pointed out, the experience of someone engaged in the *production* of original content is fundamentally different from the experience of someone *consuming* that content.¹ It is not only different from the consumer’s experience, it is essentially cut off from that experience. There is no way for the producer to have the experience of freshly consuming the product as a fully formed thing. Think of the difference between composing or even playing a piece of music and listening to it. The producer’s experi-

ence is that of creating the piece and all that this entails. The consumer's experience is about being caught up in the piece and things like talking to others about it later.

What this means is that content producers are inherently limited in understanding the experience of consumers precisely because they are engaged in production. Does this have consequences? It does, and not just that consumers might not like the product, which is always a possibility. The real consequence is that the producer is limited in even being able to think about how the consumer will experience the product. Could some producers overcome this through empathetic understanding of the consumption experience? Yes, but it is more often the case that producers need help in being able to think about the experience of consumers and how to make that experience positive. (An alternative often found in the world of art is simply for producers to profess that they do not care what the experience of consumers is, but the assumption here is that we do care—we want the audience.)

The producers of creative products need help with understanding and affecting the experience of consumers. Helping should not be regarded as a form of creative control; it should be viewed as giving added direction to creative expression. This book is aimed at providing a process for helping content producers in this way. As described in the Introduction, the process revolves around understanding the experiences consumers will or could have. Based on this understanding, the goal is to create points of contact that deliver the intended experiences. These contacts can be part of the content or separate from it. The former is the focus of this book (the latter is more relevant to a broader discussion of marketing the content via things like promotional messages, events, etc.). Content contacts can be construed as any element of the creative product that could contribute to delivering the intended experiences.

In this formulation, the content producer does not lose control of these point-of-content elements, but is directed toward creating them in such a way that they have the intended effects on the consumer's experience. An editor for *The New Yorker* still has to come up with good titles. But if the intended experience is, say, one among the cluster of Personal Identity experiences noted in the previous chapter, the editor would be helped to focus on this experience and to write a title that speaks to it.

Again, the goal is to *engage* the consumer, where engagement arises out of experiences people have with the creative product. Take the audience for a television news program. It is easy to imagine that many, even most, viewers might not be engaged with a particular program. They may watch (although many could be multi-tasking), but they are not engaged. They know the lead story yesterday covered breaking news about an automobile accident. This might have been of interest, and they might be able to recall

the story later. But they were not necessarily engaged. The program has not connected with anything going on in their lives. It is a little like eating a slice of toast for breakfast to keep hunger pangs away until lunch. It is not something that people experience beyond the mere act of consumption. Watching the news could be the same automatic, end-in-itself behavior.

Compare a light breakfast of toast with dinner at a famous restaurant where one begins the meal with caviar and a flight of different vodkas. This is something to tell others about (a Talk About and Share experience), feel important about (a personal identity experience), or learn from which vodkas you like (an Information experience). Now we have engagement. The person feels change; something is different. There is movement toward a larger goal.

It is possible for television news viewers to be engaged in the same way. This could of course happen merely by virtue of a news director and a reporter practicing their craft. The accident is reported in a way that viewers find engaging. The point of this book, however, is that this may or may not happen. It may be that the program could benefit from a process designed to facilitate viewer engagement.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONCEPTS

To recapitulate, with our process content producers first need to understand which consumer experiences might produce greater engagement with their content. They need to decide on a set of specific experiences to focus on. Then they need to create specific contacts as part of the content creation process that affects the consumer's experiences in the intended way. (It is assumed that part of the content, or even most of it, will be produced traditionally. The goal with our process is to make sure that many of the content decisions specifically take into account the intended experiences.) The effect on consumer experiences results in a higher overall level of engagement.

There is an important intermediate step in moving from understanding consumer experiences to affecting them. In order to impact consumer experiences in the richest and deepest way, the content producer needs to identify and articulate a "concept." The purpose of the present chapter is to define more closely what we mean by a concept.

In the end, a concept is the idea that consumers are left with about the product based on their experiences with it. If the experiences are powerful enough to be highly engaging, this concept will be meaningful. It will represent what consumers believe that their experiences have meant to them. Moreover, the concept will be clear and specific, as opposed to vague and general. To produce such a concept in the mind of the consumer, it follows

that we should anticipate it. Knowing in advance the concept we want consumers to be left with is what allows us to produce content contacts that help ensure consumers are left with it. Thus, a key step is to identify the concept that we want the consumer to have and to articulate it in a way that guides content creation.

So what would a concept, as something that could serve as the basis for designing content contacts, look like? The concept for Fox News might be as follows:

To older individuals whose passionate conservative political views are an important part of who they are, Fox News is the news channel of choice because it provides a conservative perspective on news and events in a media landscape marked by an unfair liberal bias.

Clearly this concept is rooted in the various Identity experiences that Rachel Davis Mersey discusses more fully in Chapter 7. The understanding is that consumers of this type want news created in a way that reflects their own sense of passionate conservatism. This experience is heightened by the idea that this news is produced especially for them, thereby validating their identity, whereas other news networks do the opposite due to their liberal bias. When they encounter the slogan “Fair & Balanced,” they understand it to imply “balancing the unfair bias of the liberal media.”

Note that the concept above is a single-sentence statement. This is important in that a single, coherent idea should be capable of being expressed in a sentence. Elaboration might be useful, but not at the expense of clarity and focus. It is always wise to take the time to try to capture the concept as fully as possible in this elemental form. Using a single sentence imposes a discipline that ensures that the implications of the idea for impacting experiences through content creation are as clear as possible.

This single-sentence format can be referred to as the “concept statement.” In the larger business world, the use of such concept statements is common, certainly in advertising as guides to promoting products but also in engineering as guides to designing products and services. Often in these contexts concept statements are referred to as “brand positioning statements.” Indeed, the very notion of a brand is best thought of as a product for which there is a strong brand positioning statement that has guided both product and communication contacts.

In the case of the illustrative Fox News concept statement, notice the power it has to guide content creation contacts. What sort of on-air personalities and voice should the network have? All the usual rules of selecting television talent and production apply, of course. But the concept dictates that talent should reflect the them-against-us identity of the politically conservative target in order to heighten the Identity experience. If the tone is shrill or

combative, this further impacts the sense of being heard and plays to the resentment of feeling socially unrecognized or even looked down on.

In contrast to the above concept statement for Fox News, suppose the network adopted the following concept:

To 40-and-older individuals who are news junkies, Fox News is the channel that provides in-depth coverage of current news topics that you can count on as well to have the latest breaking events.

This concept is anchored in a more social experience of being able to talk about current events with others and to never be left out when something happens. The kind of content contacts called for by this concept would be quite different from the preceding one. The talent and voice here should be more serious and urgent. It is also the case with this concept, however, that it is weaker. Its ties to experiences are less clear; therefore, the implications for content contacts are weaker. The results would probably be lower consumer engagement.

COMPONENTS OF THE CONCEPT STATEMENT

There are three component parts to the concept statement. To anchor the concept truly in the consumer's experience, we first have to be clear about who *the target consumer* is. Only some consumers will be able to experience a product in certain ways, and never will all consumers experience the product in the same way. So in the case of the Fox News Network, it is important to describe to whom the concept is addressed: in our construct, "to older individuals whose passionate conservative political views are an important part of who they are." This usually works best if the target is not only characterized demographically but also is described with some psychological insight (such as "whose conservative political views are an important part of who they are"). This makes it easier to keep in mind the key Identity experience on which the concept draws.

The core component of the concept has to do with how we *categorize the product*. This should imply a frame of reference that the consumer can use to locate the product in terms of to what it is similar or to whom it belongs. To understand anything, we have to be able to relate it to other things. If, for instance, I was describing an unfamiliar country, I might place it by saying that it is in Europe, near Germany. In the case of Fox News, our categorization is, "Fox News is the news channel of choice because it provides a conservative perspective on news and events." The network is placed

in the category of a news channel and beyond this one that provides a conservative perspective.

The final component of the concept is the *point of difference*. If we really are to understand something, we must know what it is similar to, but we also must know how it is different from these things. Thus, to complete the constructed Fox News concept, a point of difference is required: In this case, “news and events in a media landscape marked by an unfair liberal bias.” One way of looking at this is to ask how the consumer should know Fox News from any other news organization now or in the future that offers a conservative perspective. The difference would be the fighting quality of Fox News; it fights to be heard and respected in what its target audience perceives to be an unfair landscape of liberal opponents. Any concept can of course be copied, but having a strong point of difference not only makes a concept clearer and more complete (specifying what it is similar to but different from) but also makes it harder to copy. It makes it easier to recognize a copy as such as well.

A final point about the three components of a concept statement: Although the sentence format is necessarily linear, in crafting a strong concept statement it is important to go back and forth between the components. In thinking about the point-of-difference component, for instance, the target often becomes more sharply defined. For Fox News, we might have originally described the target as “having strong conservative views.” But in anchoring the point of difference around fighting back in the face of perceived unfair bias, we could be led to develop a more insightful description of the target as people “whose passionate conservative political views are an important part of who they are.”

DEVELOPING STRONGER CONCEPTS

The exercise of formally stating a concept anchored in consumer experiences and using it to direct content creation is, in itself, an important tool for creating media engagement. Even a loose concept can give important direction to content-creation contacts. But stronger concept statements can lead to even more impact on engagement.

Stronger concepts generally entail moving beyond a basic level of categorization at the core of the concept statement. A basic level of categorization most often involves stating the concept at the most obvious level of family membership. For example, suppose we have a woman’s magazine devoted to decorating in a “country” style. The most basic concept statement might read as follows:

To women 30 and older with a taste for traditional home décor, this is a country-style magazine that lets you take pleasure in unique, original, and natural things.

The categorization here is basic, in that it refers in a literal and product-oriented way to where the magazine belongs in the space of similar magazine products. The point of difference contributes more meaning by distinguishing this magazine from other similar magazines by pointing to a focus on the unique and original. It hints at a broader focus on a range of things other than just home furnishings.

A stronger concept would abstract the core concept of “country” as the key attribute of the product to a more consumer-oriented benefit. Why does “country style” appeal to this consumer? An insight would be that “country” signifies simplicity, a return to the cultural values of the past. The consumer appreciates the authentic and natural, qualities characteristic of places, and with products associated with non-urban settings in the past. The concept statement below follows from this insight:

To women 30 and older with a taste for traditional home décor, this is a country magazine devoted to surrounding yourself with simple things that are associated with unique, original, and natural ways of living from the past.

An even stronger concept would broaden this core abstraction to be even more inclusive of the underlying consumer experiences. The underlying experience is Utilitarian (see Chapter 5). The consumer is looking for information and advice, tips for how to decorate her home. But an even larger experience subsumes this. Consumers want to surround themselves with this style to achieve something in their lives. The experience they seek is one of greater tranquility. They want an environment that is free from the stress and complexity of modern urban living. They are literally seeking the experience of Timeout (vicariously from reading the magazine, as delineated in Chapter 11) or actual escape from their current situation (literally changing their home or even where they live).

The concept statement below follows from this fuller insight into the consumer experience:

To women 30 and older who want to get to a simpler place in their lives, free from the stress of having to do it all, this is a country magazine devoted to helping them find simpler ways of living, to cutting complexity and noise out of their lives, and to letting them take pleasure in things that are unique, original, and natural.

It might seem that the last version of the concept statement is more confining. In one way it is; it is specific. But this is not as restrictive as it might seem. By being specific, the concept gives more direction. It rules out more things, but it makes clearer the kind of content called for. Should we include the sort of tips for organizing your life currently found in a magazine like *Real Simple*? No, this magazine is not about efficiency, getting it all done; it is about finding simple things that relieve the stresses of lives seemingly grown overly complex. Moreover, this concept statement actually opens the door to a wider range of content options. It should be clear that this magazine does not need to be restricted to home furnishings. The concept can be applied to a wide range of content topics: food, travel, and almost anything else.

CONCEPTS AND CULTURE

Another property of stronger concepts is especially important for media products: namely, a really strong concept should also be at the front of cultural change. The reason is that the experiences people are more sensitive to most often stem from or are highly related to changes going on in the culture that surrounds them. Much as we think of ourselves, at least in Western cultures, as individually motivated, the experiences we seek as directions in our lives are influenced by cultural trends. So that if we experience our lives as overly busy and feel we need to seek simplicity, in large part this likely flows from a cultural trend that leads us to perceive ourselves in this way.

This link to cultural relevance is exceptionally important for media products because of the way consumers use the media as a way of staying in touch with their culture. As cultural trends emerge, consumers most often encounter them via media products. Consumers are in fact oriented to seek out media products that are on the leading edge of cultural change so that they can find the kind of experiences that the culture is pushing them toward.

What this means is that media products need to be a little ahead of consumers. Concepts must relate to the experiences that consumers are currently seeking in their lives, but these experiences should also be ones that will be even more culturally in vogue in the near future.

In our view, selecting experiences that are in the early stage of becoming culturally relevant is the key to creating “hits.” Everyone knows the media business is all about “hits” that seemingly happen almost magically—the movie, the book that just takes off. In more cases than not, this can be related back to leading-edge sensitivity to experiences that are undergoing cultural change. In these cases, consumers are beginning to feel the need for a different kind of experience and are especially engaged with media products that feel part of this change.

Think back to the media hits of the past. Why was *I Love Lucy* such a successful television program in its day? Certainly it had a great comedic actor, consistent script writing, and the like. In our terms, it also had more than this—it had a strong concept. The original “pitch” description for the program went as follows.

...A radio and/or television program, incorporating the characters Lucy and Ricky Ricardo. He is a Latin American orchestra leader and singer. She is his wife. They are happily married and very much in love. The only bone of contention between them is her desire to get into show business, and his equally strong desire to keep her out of it.... But Ricky, who was raised in show business, sees none of its glamour...and yearns to be an ordinary citizen, keeping regular hours and living a normal life. As show business is the only way he knows to make a living, and he makes a very good one, the closest he can get to this dream is having a wife who's out of show business and devotes herself to keeping as nearly a normal life as possible for him.

Note that, although this does not rely on the single-sentence concept statement format, it is entirely consistent with this in that it makes the core concept very clear. Beyond the strength of the concept, however, what made this program such a hit was its cultural relevance. In each program, Lucy explored the possibilities of working outside the home in a more (at the time) male-oriented role. The program reached an even higher level of engagement by speaking to experiences that were just becoming culturally relevant.

Now consider a successful program of today: *American Idol*. Although just a talent contest (one initially turned down in the United States), the program has a strong concept, and this accounts for the high level of viewer engagement that it has attained. To account fully for the strength of this concept and the program's status as a mega-hit, one would have to understand how the experiences it taps into are undergoing cultural change. Is the experience of failure relevant to personal identity in a way that presently reflects cultural change? Identifying with the losers may be an even more important aspect of the concept than rooting for the winners.

MULTIPLE CONCEPTS

One final issue inevitably arises in using concepts. Often it is the case that products are nested within a hierarchy of products. So a television program is itself a part of a television network, which itself may be part of a multi-

platform offering including other television networks, magazines, radio programs, Web sites, and the like (think ESPN). The question is, how should all of these products fit together?

The short answer is that concepts are even more crucial in this context. Each product should have a clear and specific concept that directs content creation regardless of the platform on which a particular show appears. In this way, the consumer's experiences are held together across platforms, maximizing total engagement. At the same time, the larger entities such as the television network, as opposed to individual programs, should also have a strong concept. This concept may or may not be subordinate to the lower-level concept. The television network may be the dominant concept, in which case it is important that the program concept be a reflection of that concept and the experiences it draws on. This has been the case for the USA Network, with its "characters" concept: No show has run without being centered on an appealing central character—from *Monk* to *The Closer*—and these characters contribute to a network-level promotion of the character concept.

In contrast, a signature program might help define a network's concept. The important principle is that each level should be defined by a concept that is consistent in the experiences that the content aims to impact to create engagement. It may be necessary to have filler content or content that inadvertently has an inconsistent concept, but this should be regarded as an exception to the ideal, and one that hopefully does not confuse or dilute the dominant concept.

* * *

In this chapter, we have focused on using experiences to create the engagement that is the theme of this book. We have seen that the process of starting with experiences and developing a concept that guides the creation of content contacts can be greatly assisted by the use of clear and specific concept statements. We reiterate that the use of concepts in this way does not deny the importance of creativity in content production. Concepts are a way of channeling that creativity toward the goal of heightened engagement with the final product.

NOTE

1. Dewey, J. (1934). *Art as experience*. New York: Perigee Books. [1980 edition].