Way and WORDS
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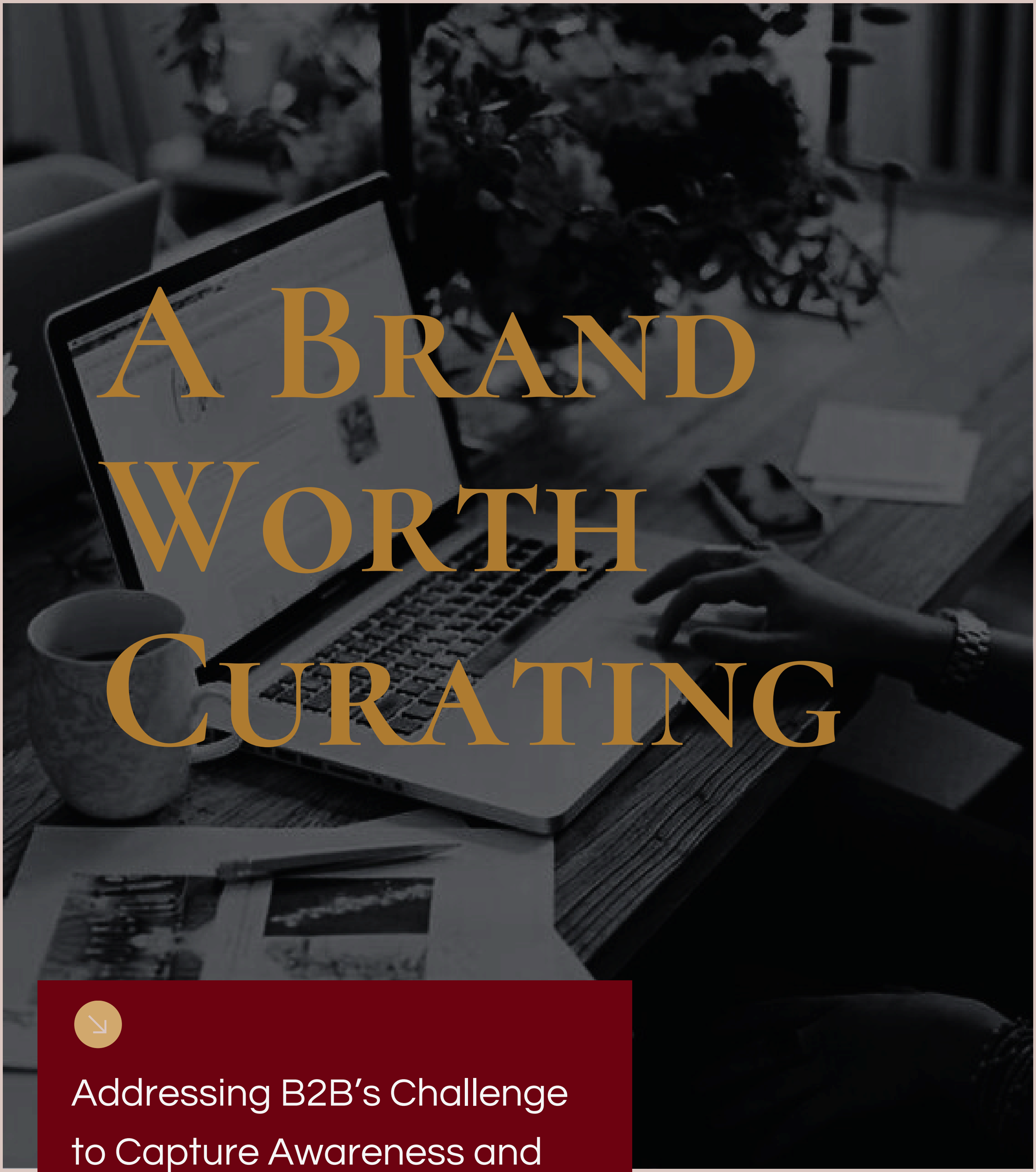

A Brand Worth Curating

Addressing B2B's Challenge to Capture Awareness and Drive Marketing Performance

We're in a curation culture, combined with an overwhelming amount of noise. It's not enough to pump out content - brands need to now become worthy of attention.

Individuals have a lot more control these days over what kind of content shows up in their feeds and who it's from. With an overwhelming (and continuously growing) number of podcasts, blogs, social communities, and news (or "news") outlets, it makes sense that people want to curate the things that are relevant to them and that they enjoy.

While we can debate the pros/cons of this curation culture and selective exposure's impact on society (and I have thoughts), in the context of business, personal curation heavily impacts nearly all facets of communications and marketing. Extinct are the days of competing with one or two breaking news stories over a limited number of trusted channels. Also gone are the days of simply needing to break through the noise with a compelling message or striking visuals. **Now, you have to show up in more places, stand out in those crowded places, and – most importantly – be a brand worthy of adding into a feed** (or at a minimum not muting, blocking, or reporting).

This year U.S. consumers are anticipated to spend nearly eight hours per day with digital media alone[1] and have basically endless options for outlets and platforms that they can swipe through on their phones. While each social platform has different levels of algorithmic and user-based controls, we as individuals create our own echo chambers through what we interact with, who we follow/mute/block, and how we customize our feeds.

With new outlets using decentralized frameworks like BlueSky, users are getting even more control to filter in what interests them and never see what doesn't.

So How The %$!# Do We Become A Brand Worth Curating?

If the digital world is personally curated chaos, and if ads and declining search traffic are not going to make up the difference, what can companies do?

This ebook outlines the core areas of how to approach and tackle curation culture for B2B organizations and provides specifics for implementing programs, all while dropping some hard truths along the way.

We start with the solid, but evolved fundamentals: **Leveraging and capitalizing on individual expertise, going beyond demographics to know your audience, and the psychology of being memorable.**

A WORD ON AD BLOCKERS

Given the level and volume of noise and curation online, many companies have advertising (aka paid media) in their marketing strategies and budgets to get more eyes on their products, news, and brand. This makes sense, but it's worth pointing out that ad blocker use is on the rise; last year, 52% of Americans used an ad blocker – up from 34% in 2022.[2]

The number of ways people can block ads is also improving, from browser extensions to DNS filtering, and ad-blocking products that use filters. There are even studies that indicate when ad blockers are used, news article consumption increases, and users report more positive experiences. So while the impact to revenue from ads is legitimate, blockers are not going away and marketing teams need to shape their programs to account for this or risk declining leads and revenue.

Curation Worthy Pillars

01 Individual experts are more valuable than a company.

02 Deep Understanding of Buyers + Expanding the Audience

03 Memorable Brand & Narrative in Action

Curation Worthy Pillar 1:

Individual experts are more valuable than a company

This is not a new concept – thought leadership programs, executive spokespeople, and speaker programs have been around for a long time for good reason; they work and people tend to trust and listen to other people vs companies, particularly in the B2B space. Individual experts have a way better chance of making it into (and staying on) someone's curated feed than a company page.

The barrier to seeing success with these types of programs for many B2B brands is that they don't go far enough with utilizing individual subject matter experts (SMEs) in their marketing programs, and the coordination is not as tight or strategically aligned as it needs to be.

The major hurdle is the bench of SMEs . This needs to be deep and constantly developing.

In B2B organizations, the bench of SMEs is usually at the C-level. This is fine, as they are typically the most senior and experienced people in the organization, and their titles will give them authority to their target audiences. If relevant to the buyer, organizations should definitely use C-levels, however, this is also the group that has the most demands on their time. Basing an entire thought leadership program around a handful of C-levels won't work because they can't dedicate the amount of resources required to make a lasting impact, and additionally, some may not even be comfortable with the process of building a personal brand.

A couple of ways to make this work:

- **Add other people and levels to the program.** The Communications team can vet and train anyone in the organization. Experts, regardless of title, should be identified and developed. The more people you have who can speak with authority on the topics that customers care about, the better the program will be. Look to seasoned ICs, people who have established audiences already, and those who want to dedicate themselves to building both their personal and the business's brand. While some may require more support and training up front, many of the best company influencers I've seen are not sitting at the C-level.

- **Pair an executive with a Chief of Staff type of employee** who can liaise with the Communications team and provide meaningful execution support on behalf of the executive (meaning they know enough and are seasoned enough to speak on their behalf if necessary, and have posting credentials to the executive's accounts).

Curation Worthy Pillar 1:

Individual experts are more valuable than a company

As part of this program, individual SMEs need to ensure they're posting several times a week, if not daily, depending on the outlet. This is on top of expertise-validating types of programs like earned media and speaking opportunities, which should happen throughout the year. This amount of content and perspective-gathering takes time and resources to maintain, but considering the current rate of attention spans (8.25 seconds for text/images and 120 seconds for video on average[3]) and the lifespan of content, frequency is necessary to make the curation draft list.

Common hiccup: over-controlling the content.
Individual-focused thought leadership programs undoubtedly need to be orchestrated, but many companies find themselves in trouble when they try to control what's going on too tightly and are almost militant in their program execution. Obviously, you don't want an SME to go off the rails or wildly off brand; however, given the lifespan of certain social posts, it's okay and actually preferable if the posts prioritize quality and speed over approval and buy-in. Do not over-process an SME program.

Quick Tip: If you work in a heavily regulated industry or are publicly traded, it's a good idea to work with the legal team in advance to align on the overall plan and themes of your program. Outline your monitoring methodology and incident response plan in advance with them, setting the expectation that not every single post can go through legal approval unless they can do it in minutes. Have remediation and response plans in place in case something goes wrong. Also, make sure to have a clear list of topics outlined which the company will not touch or comment on. If you're heading into an IPO, please observe the rules of quiet periods so that you don't get in trouble with the SEC.

Download a template to manage your SME bench.

Coordinate SME topic platforms by audience and channel

Not every expert in your organization needs to talk about the same thing. In fact, they shouldn't. Assign SMEs to different themes or topic platforms. For example, your VP of Engineering should cover more technical topics about your solutions that appeal to a hands-on user product admin audience. Your CEO should, in most cases, cover topics spanning leadership or corporate culture or whatever their background – make it relevant to advancing the overall company brand and story.

To best load balance effort to outcomes, match up the topic themes with the most appropriate channel. If you target a lot of software developers or IT pros, for example, they might not be super active on LinkedIn and may spend time on channels like Reddit or Spiceworks, so you must show up there. This obviously requires a deep understanding of your audiences and the written and unwritten rules of each channel you're going into. A social or communications expert should do thorough research and advise on how to behave on different outlets for the best

Curation Worthy, Pillar 2:

Deep Understanding of Buyers + Expanding the Audience

> *" In the flood of ways people categorize themselves and engage in content that reinforces their identity and who they want to be, organizations need to understand emotional drivers, personal and professional goals, cultural norms, what someone reads, and who they have already curated into their lives."*

It's very likely that your org has some sort of deck or document that outlines who your target buyer personas are. Maybe you even have ideal customer profiles (ICPs) created to provide another layer of their functions, titles, authority, and role in the buying process. Hopefully they are mapped to sales and retention metrics to validate what industries, regions, and titles the marketing and sales teams should be targeting.

Using this information is important for building a curatable brand, but given the digital media landscape, teams need to both go deeper in understanding their audience and also expand who is included in the targeting.

Depth of knowledge: Talk to (and lightly stalk) your customers

It is not nearly enough to know the list of customer demographics if you're trying to inspire people to curate you into their feeds. In the flood of ways people categorize themselves and engage in content that reinforces their identity and who they want to be, organizations need to understand emotional drivers, personal and professional goals, cultural norms, what someone reads, and who they have already curated into their lives.

Personalization tools are getting better at tracking data and showing buyer intent signals, but keep in mind that cookie tracking and privacy laws vary, so the best way to know your buyer is to talk to them and observe their behaviors. Communications and Marketing teams should listen and review transcripts of customer calls with CSMs, ask to sit in on quarterly reviews, understand product and feature usage, and regularly access their company's voice of the customer program and any customer advisory council relationships.

Curation Worthy , Pillar 2:

Deep Understanding of Buyers + Expanding the Audience

Expand the targets
When faced with budget constraints (which basically everyone has), it's normal to only spend resources on the target audiences that will drive revenue – the end decision maker or buyer. However, as people change roles more often, buyer committees get more expansive, and search/paid programs don't deliver as consistently, brands should widen the nets of who they engage for awareness and education. The ultimate goal is being memorable and staying top of mind in a variety of audiences that will interact with your brand or product in both the pre-sale, sales, and post-sales lifecycles.

Some general role types to expand into: product users (and not just the admin), buyer influencers, buyer committee members, and roles that would benefit indirectly from the successful use of your product/service. Here are examples:

- **Buyer influencer:** Say you sell a phishing education or testing product/service. In this scenario, you're going after the CISO and Head of Compliance, maybe the Head of IT or COO, but what about the training and development manager who sits in HR and would be involved in making sure this type of training was included in onboarding and annual compliance training programs? What about the managers or ICs on the compliance and security teams who are probably going to be asked by the CISO what they think about the tool?

- **Indirect benefit role:** If you sell a support/help desk/ticketing software or tool, your target buyer is likely the Head of IT / VP of Help Desk Services/COO or similar. But CS and Marketing will likely benefit from the customer interaction data that the tool collects, and Product and Development teams would benefit from seeing data on the common problems people call/chat about. There are opportunities to tell that story to those audiences and build a broader network of potential advocates in the buyer or renewal process.

This is not to say you need to allocate advertising dollars equally among these audiences, but to include them in an intentional way in your comms and brand programs.

Curation Worthy , Pillar 3:

Memorable Brand & Narrative in Action

Arguably, the most important and hardest to do out of everything when it comes to being a curation-worthy brand is the combined art + science of being memorable.

Human memory and recall are imperfect, and, while neuroscience and psychology continue to explore the processes, limitations, and reasons behind why and how our brains function, we do know a few things that will help an idea/problem/product/brand stick in our minds: **Repetition**, **Novelty**, and **Emotional Resonance**.

Repetition: Repeating a message or a theme will help people remember it, but the number of times someone has to see something varies greatly. There is a rule in comms that says "once you're sick of talking about it, your audience is just starting to listen," and it's a good general rule. Seek consistency on your narrative and themes over several quarters and your brand for years.

Novelty: Our brains like new things... or at least, new-ish. There is a fine balance between being too new that we're turned off, and so familiar that it's boring. A great example of novelty in branding is Coke's "Share a Coke" campaign. Using unexpected visuals or a unique delivery method is a way to infuse novelty. This is why old-school marketing tactics like direct mail sometimes work really well today; they are novel again. It takes creativity and some bravery, but it's a key way to staying memorable with customers and prospects.

Emotional Resonance: Communicators know that you need to spark an emotion for something to be remembered. We see this in all forms of comms and marketing, as well as politics, entertainment, and news. If you can inspire joy, fear, anger, delight, sadness, or humor, you have a better chance of someone remembering what you're saying and who you are. It's the basis of why storytelling works really well: stories are designed to evoke strong emotions and therefore stick in people's brains. For B2B brands, there has long been a type of aversion to emotionally driven storytelling in favor of facts and figures – ROI, time saved, speed increased. While those are all good things to boast, they are not what our brains are wired to remember.

Think through the deeper-rooted purpose and the people-impact of your product/service, AKA the tangible benefits. Does your product mean that engineers get to spend less time in meetings? Say that. Will your martech tool of choice arm the CMO with valuable intel for the board so they are not facing a barrage of questions about MQLs vs SQLs vs Pipeline? Get in the minds of your customers and find the emotional threads to weave your story around.

Curation Worthy, Pillar 3:

Memorable Brand & Narrative in Action

Memorable brands in action

Companies know they need a brand and narrative strategy that resonates with their target market and is differentiated from competitors, but putting a memorable brand into action consistently is extremely difficult in practice for a variety of reasons:

- Misalignment at the top of the organization on what should or should not be said
- Infatuation with competitors and how they position
- Lack of available messaging know-how and storytelling skills
- Imbalance of personal experience/feelings and market data informing messaging–both are needed, and swinging too hard either way will result in underperforming messaging
- Not fully understanding target audiences
- Overly technical or product/feature-focused messaging (speeds and feeds will not draw enough emotion out of people) – aim for key benefit positioning over product positioning

Brand Voice/Personality Mistakes Most Make

Most B2B brands get stuck in 'safe' messages that are accurate but boring, or that are close cousins to competitor messaging. How many have seen a B2B brand guideline that said "professional but friendly" when describing a desired tone? **Real talk: "Professional by friendly" is nonsense**. Putting aside the fact that it is grossly unhelpful and doesn't translate across cultures or languages, following that guidance will make messaging vanilla at best and forgettable.

Also, visuals – don't get your content lost in the sea of 'tech company blue.' Both the message and your multimedia need to be shareable, savable, and repostable.

That "Marketing Rule of 7" is BS.

Fun fact – that "rule" everyone seems to know that you supposedly need to "see/hear a message 7 times before remembering it" was invented in the 1930s by marketers in the movie industry when they suggested someone needed to see a movie poster 7 times before they bought a ticket. This wasn't some methodical, scientific study, even though it's been treated as fact since then.

Even if that rule was close to accurate in the 1930s – let's think about what was going on in the 1930s:

- Color TVs didn't exist yet (they were introduced in 1954 and became affordable for consumers in the 1960s)
- The Empire State Building was completed in 1931
- Radar was invented in 1938
- Astronomers discovered Pluto in 1930

Things have changed.

There is no 'magic number' of how many times a person needs to see/hear something before they remember it – and even then, recall alone doesn't mean someone will match a memory with a need to buy something.

A Word about Channels

Invest in the people and tools to show up consistently

Trade news, business news, broadcast news, local news, LinkedIn, Twitter/X, TikTok, Threads, BlueSky, Reddit, Instagram, Facebook, Spiceworks, Substack, Podcasts, Discord, Slack communities, industry events, partner events, webinars, review sites, G2, analyst reports... The list of where it's possible to show up is overwhelming, and most B2B businesses can't afford to be everywhere they need to be.

So, prioritize, but also **invest and make realistic resourcing decisions based on where your customers already are engaging.** (Again, back to knowing and lightly stalking your audience!)

Final Word

3 HARD TRUTHS ABOUT BEING CURATION WORTHY

01 **Stop trying to tie every Comms/Marketing activity to a revenue number**. Attribution obsession will kill good programs very quickly. Besides, revenue is a sales KPI, not a Marketing one, and certainly not a Comms one. Track trends in *awareness*, *reach*, *engagement*, and *organic search/traffic* which align more closely with a performance program, but remember: humans buy in non-linear ways with emotion. Word of mouth (something that isn't directly measurable) is still the most powerful tool.

02 One social media manager can not effectively manage more than 3 account pages, no matter how skilled or how many AI tools they are using. This is especially true if you want compelling and on-brand content, requiring results measurement and reporting, need them to stay on-brand, ask them to deliver competitive or industry intel, and also ask that they experiment. Drop down to 2 accounts when you are asking them write *and* design content. Similarly, one PR person will not be able to manage a full SME thought leadership program, pitch and manage media, draft press releases and bylines, measure and report results, and continuously come up with story ideas and content to fuel their programs. This is why PR agencies exist. Use them.

03 Set aside resources and time to experiment and research. Channels and relevant topics evolve – sometimes really quickly and the team running this program needs to have the space to stay current on trends. Staff and resource your organization accordingly.

NEED SUPPORT BUILDING A BRAND AND COMMUNICATIONS PROGRAMS THAT INSPIRE PEOPLE TO ADD YOU INTO THEIR FEEDS?

GET IN TOUCH WITH WAY AND WORDS AND SIGN UP NEWSLETTER FOR FRESH COMMUNICATIONS INSIGHTS, NO-BS TIPS, AND ACTIONABLE GUIDANCE.

Reference Articles

1. Statista: “Time spent per day with major media in the United States from 2019 to 2026"

2. The Register. “Majority of Americans now use ad blockers"

3. IACET “Short Attention Spans and Long-Term Retention: The Evolution of Learning in the Digital Space”