

Content's Competitive Advantage: Interview with Ann Handley

<http://www.contentmarketinginstitute.com/2011/08/interview-with-ann-handley/>

Patricia Redsicker

Hi everyone. I'm Patricia Redsicker, blogging for Content Marketing Institute, and today I am simply delighted to be joined by none other than Ann Handley. She is the Chief Content Officer of MarketingProfs, and the co-author of [*Content Rules: How to Create Killer Blogs, Podcasts, Videos, Ebooks, and Webinars that Engage Customers and Ignite Your Business*](#). Wow! It's all in there isn't it Ann? (laughing)

Patricia Redsicker

I'm so happy to have you here with me today. Thank you so much for coming, Ann.

Ann Handley

Thank you for having me, and you did an awesome job with what, I think, is the longest tagline in the history of book publishing.

Patricia Redsicker

I love it. We're going to dig into that today. I really, highly doubt that there's anyone in our audience that doesn't know who you are. You are the diva of content marketing; the world's first Chief Content Officer, and I'm curious: Are there men out there who are a little envious of that title that you have? (laughing)

Ann Handley

(laughing) I don't know; that's funny. I don't even think it's the world— I would actually go as far as to say it's the first Chief Content Officer [title] in the galaxy, is really how I like to position it.

But yeah, I think I am the first one, and I've never heard anybody say that they were jealous of it, but I have noticed that more and more people have that title (as I am sure you have as well); that more people are sort of adopting that title. So I am really, really happy about that.

Patricia Redsicker

Very cool. Why don't you start by telling us your story — how you met Allen Weiss, the founder of MarketingProfs, and how your story at the company began?

Ann Handley

I was the co-founder of a company called ClickZ.com, which is very similar to MarketingProfs. It was a company that I cofounded in 1997. When I sold it in 2000, I had a two-year non-compete that precluded me from working in the digital publishing space for two years.

And then as I was nearing the end of that two-year sabbatical, I was tired of 'hanging around by the pool.' I called Allen Weiss and said, *"I notice that you have this publication that's cropped up*

in the years since I sold ClickZ, and I'd like to talk to you about working with you.” And he said, “Really. So you don't remember me, do you?” and I said, “Should I?” (laughing) and he said, “Yeah, as a matter of fact don't you remember, toward the end of your tenure at ClickZ, I had actually proposed doing some articles for you, like a regular column, and you said ‘No thanks.’”

I didn't really think academics had much to offer marketing professionals, which was really classy of me now that I think about it (laughing). So he forgave me, and we (sort of) have a good laugh about that every once in a while.

But that was in 2002, and I've been here ever since. It's the longest job I think I've ever had. It's probably the best job I ever had, too. I love my job.

Patricia Redsicker

MarketingProfs' *Daily Fix* is one of the blogs within the company, and it's one of the leading and most visited marketing blogs in the industry, right?

Ann Handley

It's funny because MarketingProfs has so much content that we're putting out there. We publish a daily newsletter, of which the *Daily Fix* blog post is a component. We have weekly webinars. We have a monthly (sort of) virtual conference. We have live events. We have 10 mini-podcasts; mini seminars, if you will...

So we have all this content, and it's always funny to hear what resonates with people — what they remember about MarketingProfs. So it's funny that you mention the *Daily Fix* because I think of that as such a small part of what we do.

Patricia Redsicker

And yet it has such a wide readership. And I also know that you have very many different people writing for that blog, is that correct?

Ann Handley

Yeah, we do. Almost all of our content — and I would include the articles on the website, which are more "how-to" focused, and the blog posts, which I think of as more of MarketingProfs' editorial page; more opinion; more *“Here's my take on something”*.

But all of that content is contributed by outside people — contributors who are writing for the site but have other jobs, and other lives, and are professionals working as marketers.

Patricia Redsicker

So Ann, how do you go about selecting the kind of writer that you're looking to contribute to your blogs or your columns?

Ann Handley

Well, first I look for people who give me really good gifts, and then based on that, sort of the amount of money that... (laughing) I'm totally kidding. You know I'm kidding, right? (laughing)

Patricia Redsicker

(laughing) I know you are. I hope everybody else knows that too (laughing).

Ann Handley

No, I'm really kidding. It's funny. It's kind of a combination of things.

I don't manage the blog, but Veronica Jarski, who works at MarketingProfs, is an awesome editor, and she manages the blog.

It's a combination of people either coming to us and saying, *"I'm a reader and I would like to write for you."* and they submit something, or it's somebody who comments a lot on articles or blog posts and who we think has something to contribute.

If they care enough to be a regular reader and commenter, then I think they probably have something to say. So a lot of times we will approach people who are just frequent visitors (for lack of a better word).

But then I also do this thing — and this is true for all the content on the site — called social prospecting, and what I mean by that is I go to social sites like Twitter, or LinkedIn, or Facebook, or Focus - a Q&A site, or Quora for example, and I look to see who has something to say; who is interesting; who has a different take on things. And I will approach them and say, *"Hi, have you ever thought about writing for us?"* or, *"Would you be interested in writing for us?"*

MarketingProfs has a huge platform, and I hope that people get something out of it. I'm pretty sure they do, based on the feedback that I get from our contributors. So I hope that they get something out of it, and I try to offer them the exposure that the platform offers.

Patricia Redsicker

You personally produce a ton of content. You're a published book author; you write for *Huffington Post*, for *Mashable*, for *American Express Open Forum*, for *MarketingProfs*, for the *Daily Fix*, and *Annarchy*, and I don't even know how many other forums that you are writing for and producing content for (laughing). So I guess the question here is, how do you plan for all of this? How do you get time to do this?

And the reason why this is an important question is because often times you find businesses saying, *"Oh, we don't have time to blog"* or *"We don't have time to do that"*, and here's Ann Handley, who's running a company and writing all this content, and she has the time to do it. So tell us a little bit about your planning methodology, if you will.

Ann Handley

Thank you for that. And actually, I just started writing a monthly column on lead generation for *Entrepreneur Magazine*, so for somebody like me who has really deep roots in print publications, it's kind of funny to go home again...I'm really excited about that.

So...It is a lot, but I guess I think of it just like I approach companies and advise them: "You've got to be contributing content. You've got to be producing content as a cornerstone of your marketing."

Maybe it's easier for somebody like me who really is a writer and an editor at heart, but I think that any business has to find a way to kind of crack it; to be out there producing content. Maybe that means you're going to decide whether to hire somebody who can do it for you (or hire your own Chief Content Officer) or whether you're going to sort of figure out what platform and format works best for you. Maybe you're a video person, or maybe you can do a podcast (like this one), if you're more interested in communicating that way.

I think it's really imperative. I think everybody has to do it.

Patricia Redsicker

I've been reading some of the personal stories that you've been writing on your personal blog, *Annarchy*, which are really just beautiful, wonderful stories, and I want to talk a little bit about that because I've been exploring the subject of personal stories and how they fit into corporate content.

People sometimes get a little uncomfortable with the question: "*How should we use personal stories in our content marketing?*" And I understand that you are writing these stories on a separate platform, on your personal blog, but I would really like for you to comment on that and tell us what you think about the role of personal stories in corporate content.

Ann Handley

Yeah, that's a really good question. I am a big believer in stories as a way to engage, whether you're writing it on a personal blog (like I often do), or whether you're writing in a more professional setting.

I also draw the line between personal and personable. I think that it's easy for me writing on *AnnHandley.com - Annarchy*, my blog, to be personal because it is a personal format for me. But I think it's an easier sell for corporations if you don't call it personal, but *personable*, because I think that's an important distinction to make.

So it's not about this soul bearing stuff that I tend to do on my own blog and that I'm comfortable doing in that format. It's more about giving your product or service some flesh. Giving it a pulse, some blood, and bones, and all the stuff that makes it real, that people can relate to. So I guess that's the distinction that I make for companies, and that may be an easier thing for them to understand.

You know the notion of story is this amorphous, squishy thing, right? It's like “We're not storytellers”, and sometimes they cringe at that word as applied to business — just like a lot of companies do. Because *what does that really mean?*

All that means is telling your own story. I think the easiest way to embrace that for a company is to tell the stories of your customers, and what I mean by that is tell how your products and services have helped them. Talk about how your products have helped them — as we say in the book — “run faster, jump higher, or ease their pain or shoulder their burdens”.

And the companies that are really embracing that [type of story-telling], I think, are doing a really good job in content marketing because they're doing two things: First of all, they're making it personable. They're giving it a pulse and some flesh and bones, but at the same time they're taking the focus off of themselves. And you know as a content marketer that it's really important not to talk about yourself all the time. You need to talk about how you're helping customers, and I think the companies that are really embracing storytelling well are those [that] are successful.

Patricia Redsicker

Let's talk a little bit about your book. The book is *Content Rules*, and Ann is the co-author of *Content Rules* with C.C. Chapman. In the book, you talk about the notion of embracing being a publisher. So what that means is that ordinary businesses who are selling widgets, or cupcakes, or beer or whatever it is, need to get into this whole mode of thinking that “We are publishers”; that we can produce content and that it's not just journalists or publishing houses that can do that.

In your experience, do you see that businesses are intimidated by the idea of becoming publishers?

Ann Handley

I actually think that a lot of businesses are starting to accept it. Maybe not completely embrace it, but I do think that they understand if they have a website, if they are doing business online, they are already publishers. They are already in the game because they're publishing a website.

So if they're doing business online, I think a lot of them have said, “Ok yes, we are publishers.” So I think that they get that piece of it. I think that the piece that's harder to kind of “grok”, if you will, is, “*Just what does that mean? How do we really embrace that fully? How do we start producing content on a regular basis?*” It's hard.

It's a lot of work, and I think that's the piece that a lot of companies are stuck at, and that's why we wrote the book.

We didn't spend a lot of time talking about how you need to understand that you are a publisher now. There are other books that preceded ours that do a really nice job of setting that up, including David Meerman Scott's *New Rules of Marketing and PR*. "Inbound Marketing", and Joe Pulizzi's book all did a really great job of setting that up.

Our book takes over from there and says, *"Ok, so now you know you're a publisher. You know you're doing business online. Now what? How do you create those blogs, and podcasts, and videos, and eBooks, and webinars on a regular and consistent basis? How do you differentiate yourself? How do you create a voice that's going to resonate? How do you make sure that you're able to produce stuff that people like and enjoy that really reflects (as we say in the book) the soul of your brand, who are you?"*

So that's really what we set out to do, and I'm thrilled. I loved working with C.C. He and I really work well together, and I think the book is really great. We actually just passed the 20,000 copies mark, so that was actually really fun for us. That happened a couple of weeks ago.

Patricia Redsicker

Congratulations. That's wonderful.

Ann Handley

Thank you. We're really excited about that.

Patricia Redsicker

I also wanted to talk about another piece in the book, and I think it's in the introduction of the book, where you provide the case for content, and within that little section you talk about the competitive advantage that business owners have when they use content marketing. Would you explain to our audience what that advantage looks like?

Ann Handley

Yeah, it's really to think about content not as a task and not as a burden, which I think a lot of people or a lot of businesses [that] aren't used to being publishers consider it. They think, *"Oh God, now I've got to do something else? I don't have the skills for that."*

So [it's] really to shift your thinking away from feeling like it's a burden to thinking of it as an opportunity. Think of it as an opportunity to really connect with your customers and prospects and draw them to you, and then once they're with you, connecting with them, engaging them in a really meaningful way.

In the book we tell the story of Marcus Sheridan, who owns a company called River Pools, and he sells swimming pools. He's the CEO of a swimming pool company, but he doesn't think of himself as just a swimming pool retailer; he thinks of himself as somebody who is a resource to anybody thinking about plunking down \$30-40,000 on an in-ground swimming pool.

And he says that that shift in thinking — to go from just being a retailer to somebody who is going to help somebody presale, in the middle of the sale, post-sale, and then all along really made a huge difference for him and his business. It's allowed him to really grow over the past couple of years when people didn't really have a lot of discretionary income to spend on swimming pools. So that really encapsulates the fundamental shift and the benefit [is that] he sees it as an opportunity.

Patricia Redsicker

And a little closely related to that question is the idea of success in content marketing. A lot of people are new to content marketing. They don't exactly know what to do, but once they've started doing it they want to know what success looks like. So could you explain to our audience what content marketing success looks like? How do I know when I've arrived, if you will? (laughing)

Ann Handley

(laughing) Yeah, right. Well I think there are a lot of ways that you can answer that question, and it's only the company itself that can really understand or define what success is because first, before you do anything, you have to think about why we are doing this and what is going to be our goal? How are we going to measure the success? And then you can set those metrics to measure.

So in Marcus Sheridan's case, for example, what he wanted was to get people on his email list. He wanted to be engaging with them on a regular basis so that he was able to be a resource to them, but also to market to them and be very top of mind when it came to either buying a pool or referring him to somebody else who was going to be putting in a pool.

I think fundamentally the way to measure success is to define your goals, first. So is that going to be, *“Do you just want to make more money? Do you want to get leads for sales? Do you want to collect email addresses for a database?”* What is it that you're trying to do? So once you're able to sort of define what that is, then you are able to measure it.

If you don't define that success and you just throw up a blog and you start posting and you're not measuring anything, you're not creating a path to conversion in any measurable way, then it probably will fail because you're not able to feel the success of it.

So I think you've got to really start by thinking and answering that (as we say in the books) why question: *“Why are we doing this to begin with?”*

Patricia Redsicker

Thank you. That's a very good definition. I have a question here from Mica Mandigma on Facebook, and she wants to know *“What are your thoughts on article marketing. Is it still relevant?”* I think that's a really good question that she asks, considering the recent Google Panda updates that have affected websites such as Mahalo, Ezinearticles... So what do you

think?

Ann Handley

Honestly, even before the Panda updates, I have really never been a fan of broadcasting article marketing. And you've got to understand that I say this as a traditional publisher who has been providing information to audiences for a really long time.

So when I would get one of those article pitches from somebody who was clearly broadcasting it to a bunch of different business-to-business publications, or a bunch of different marketing publications, I just deleted it immediately, because to me it wasn't unique; it wasn't targeted to me; it wasn't personal; it wasn't specific; and so I've never been a fan of it. I'm actually glad that it's sort of less popular now for that reason, because of the Panda update.

But with that said, I do think that placing articles, placing relevant, decent articles in publications, is a good approach. I get people all the time who want to write for MarketingProfs because they do see the value in that approach, and I absolutely embrace that.

But again, these are people that are building a relationship with me, or with the publication, or with another editor here, so I think that's the key. It's really being specific about your channels and what's really going to work for you, and not just broadcasting.

Patricia Redsicker

We've come to the end of our interview, Ann. Do you have any last thoughts? Anything you'd like to share with our audience?

Ann Handley

Yeah, I would just encourage anybody that wants to know about content marketing to check out the site that you're on right now — Content Marketing Institute — and then check out the resources on MarketingProfs. We've got a lot of stuff there that talks about content strategy, content marketing, so I encourage you to just go in, poke around, and connect with me on Facebook, or Twitter, or LinkedIn. I love to talk about content, so connect with me. I'm @MarketingProfs on Twitter, and I'm Ann Handley (obviously) on Facebook and LinkedIn.

Patricia Redsicker

Ann I want to thank you very much for spending time with me today, and I really enjoyed our conversation. I certainly look forward to seeing you at Content Marketing World next month. Ladies and gentlemen, the name of the book is *Content Rules*, by Ann Handley and C.C. Chapman. Thanks very much for listening to this podcast.