

The Content Marketing Paradox Revisited

Time for a reboot?



TrackMaven

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Introduction

*By early 2015, marketers faced a problem. In the rush to “do” content marketing, brands of all shapes and sizes created more content on more and more channels. The result? Many brands wasted their marketing investments churning out content on every new platform that reared its head. We called it the **content marketer’s paradox**: creating more content with less return.*

But in the past 12 months, the content marketer’s paradox has compounded. Brands keep pumping out content, but engagement continues to plummet. So what are the major headwinds holding marketers back? And what can marketers do to avoid falling prey to the paradox?

This report provides a comprehensive analysis of the state of digital content marketing for brands in 2016. We used the TrackMaven software platform to analyze the impact of 12 months of marketing activity for 22,957 brands across all major industries. Collectively, this analysis included 50 million pieces of content across six digital marketing channels — Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, LinkedIn, and blogs — with a combined total of 75.7 billion interactions.

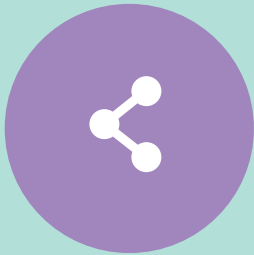
The findings point to a paradigm shift in digital strategy as social networks fight to monetize, mobile content consumption explodes, and the bar for richer in-platform content rises. In this report, we surface the latest trends in digital strategy, and explain why the marketers crafting platform-specific content are poised to capitalize on ever-evolving social networks.

22,957
BRANDS

50 million
PIECES OF CONTENT

75.7 billion
INTERACTIONS

Key Findings



Despite the fact that engagement continues to fall, brands are hell-bent on content and publishing.

From its highest to lowest points, the output of content per brand increased 35% per channel across 2015, but content engagement decreased by 17%.



Content output per brand increased most on Twitter and Facebook (60% and 31% year-over-year, respectively).

Engagement dropped across all major social networks, but plummeted most on Pinterest. Twitter is the notable exception; engagement rose slightly across 2015.



Two headwinds gained strength: the monetization of social networks and the rise in mobile content consumption.

For marketing teams, combating both will require more resources and more creativity.



Blogging is still a core competency for brands.

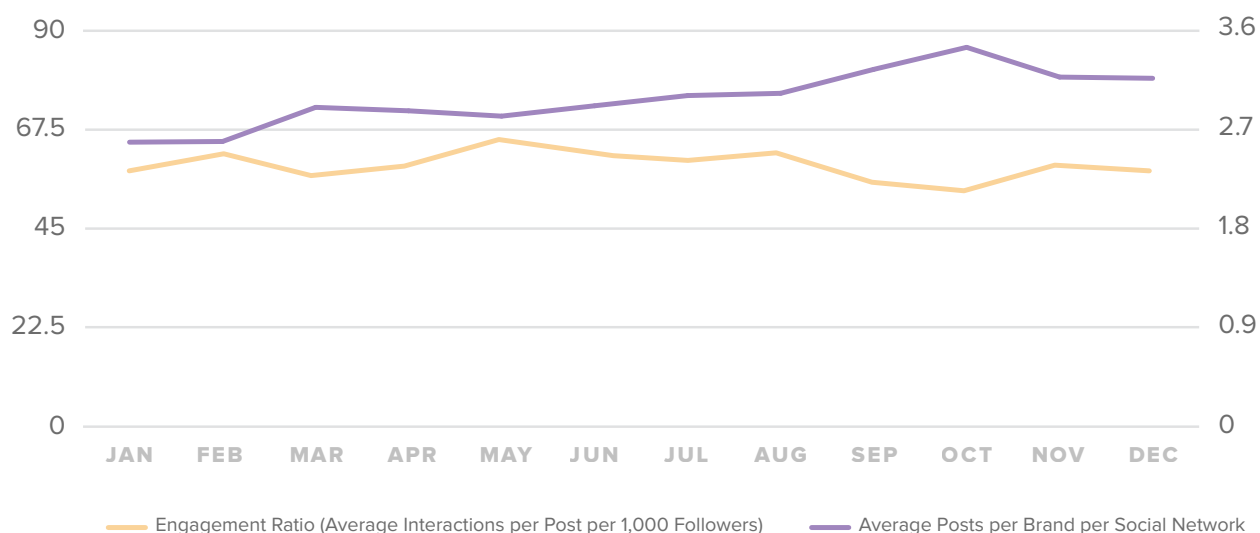
The average brand blogging frequency per month decreased in 2015, but blog social shares held mostly steady across the year with a few notable spikes.

01 Content Marketing in 2016: New Challenges, New Opportunities

Digital distribution platforms are more pervasive and more sophisticated, but brands still struggle to use them efficiently. In 2016, we're still facing the content marketer's paradox: more content with less return. Let's look at the macro marketing landscape to understand this trend qualitatively.

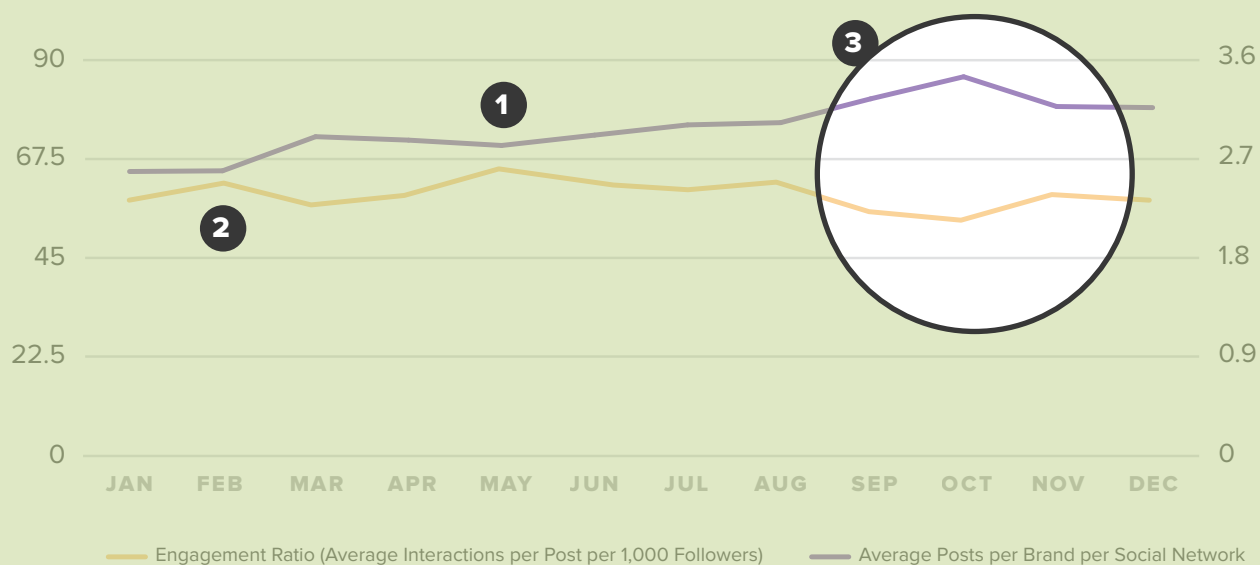
The graph below displays the current state of digital content marketing in one chart. We analyzed the output of marketing content and corresponding interactions from a sample of 22,957 brands on five major social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, and LinkedIn) from January through December 2015. The sample includes a grand total of 75.7 billion interactions across 50 million pieces of brand-generated content. The graph depicts the number of posts per brand per channel over time (purple), along with the corresponding interactions per brand per post per 1,000 followers (orange).

GRAPH 1 Output vs. Engagement with Branded Marketing Content by Month, 2015



KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Content Marketing Landscape in One Chart

GRAPH 1 Output vs. Engagement with Branded Marketing Content by Month, 2015


1

The output of content per brand per channel increased 35% from its highest to lowest points.

At the peak in October 2015, the average brand generated 87.5 social media posts per channel per month. Given that brands use six or seven social networks on average (six for B2B brands, seven for B2C brands¹), that equates to a significant investment of time, staff, and paid distribution budget.

2

Engagement with branded content, however, fell 17% across 2015.

Towards the end of 2015, the engagement ratio dropped to a low of 2.19 interactions per post per brand per 1,000 followers on average. The big picture: marketers are generating more content with less to show for it.

3

Content overload is quantifiable.

This graph illuminates just how much harder it is to be heard above the noise. When content output spiked in October 2015, engagement levels took a sharp downturn. There is a limit to how much content can be consumed, liked, shared, etc., and brands and social networks alike are competing for their share of engagement.

¹ 2016 B2B and B2C Content Marketing Trends Reports —North America: Content Marketing Institute/MarketingProfs

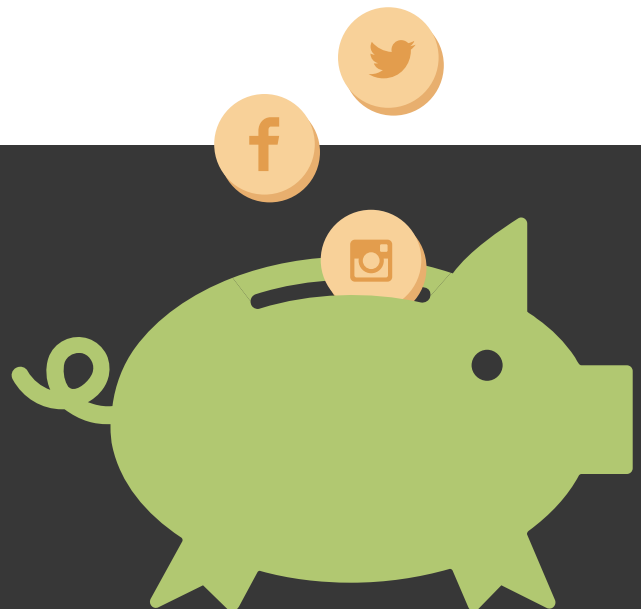
02 Two Major Marketing Headwinds: Monetization and Mobile

The bar for content quality — particularly channel-specific content — must rise. Why? The monetization of social networks and rise in mobile content consumption are the driving factors.

As social networks proliferate and fight to monetize, the social media “free lunch” is over. In the nascent days of social media marketing, early adopters were able to amass significant social audiences by doing little more than posting consistently. But the days of the free lunch on social are coming to an end. Networks continue to implement new ways to monetize audience access while preserving content quality and relevance.

Think of it as the checks and balances of the Internet. Social networks create a paywall between brands and audiences, thus putting the onus on marketers to create content worth the investment of paid promotion. And by forcing brands to pay to play, the onus is on social networks to keep user bases engaged and growing. Given the rise in mobile Internet usage (discussed further on Page 9), marketers can look to ad revenues as an inverse leading indicator of organic reach on a social network.

As social networks proliferate and fight to monetize, the social media “free lunch” is over.



The Rise of the Pay-to-Play Platforms

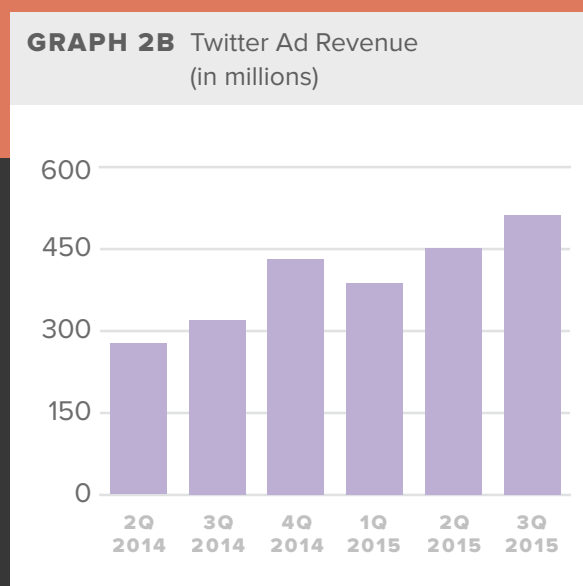
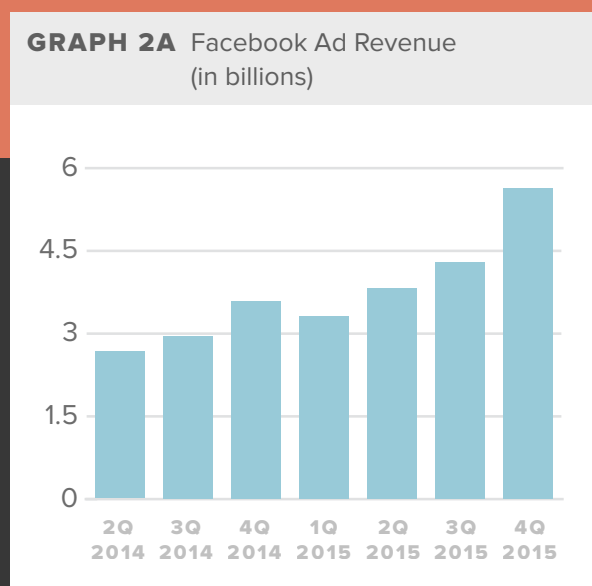
As social networks grow up, they face the typical challenges of entrée into adulthood: self-definition and self-sufficiency: We need only look at the two long-established social media rivals — Facebook and Twitter — to see this transition playing out with varied success.

Ad revenue for both Facebook (Graph 2A) and Twitter (Graph 2B) increased across the last seven and six quarters, respectively. Facebook's ad revenue grew 111 percent, rising to 5.6 billion by 4Q2015. Facebook's monthly active users (MAUs) grew 22 percent across the same period, topping out at 1.59 billion.¹ Twitter's ad revenue and user base, however, are quite literally on a different scale — millions, not billions. Twitter saw 85 percent ad revenue growth across six quarters, and 17 percent growth in MAUs (to 320 million) by Q32015.²

As we explore further on Page 12, Facebook offers greater quid pro quo to the brands paying to play on its network. In fact, the average engagement ratio for brands on Facebook is three times higher than that on Twitter. Remember, it's all about checks and balances; if brands are forced to pay to play, it better be worth their while. As newer networks fight to monetize, watch these metrics. Soaring ad revenue may well be the Grim Reaper of organic reach, but healthy growth in MAUs signals a network's relevance.

² <http://investor.fb.com/results.cfm>

³ <https://investor.twitterinc.com/results.cfm>



Momentum on Mobile Drives Need for Robust In-Platform Content

Just five years ago in 2011, American adults spent less than an hour per day on mobile devices.⁴ By 2015, adults spent 5.6 hours a day on Internet-connected devices, more than half of which (2.8 hours) were spent on mobile devices. What's more, the average U.S. smartphone user now spends 88 percent of his or her time on a mobile device within an app, and only 12 percent using the web browser.⁵ This growth in mobile, in-app Internet usage redoubles the necessity for brands to deliver content that is consumable on the go and at first touch.

Consider the efforts from social networks to increase in-platform action and attention, including Facebook Instant Articles; “Shop Now” and “Buy It” buttons on Instagram⁶ and Pinterest;⁷ autoplay video content on Twitter⁸ and Facebook,⁹ and SnapChat Discover, which delivers in-feed curated stories from media companies. In other words, social media content is no longer a “clickbait” lure. It needs legs of its own.

⁴ <http://www.kpcb.com/internet-trends>

⁵ <http://www.nydailynews.com/life-style/people-apps-web-browsers-study-article-1.1913628>

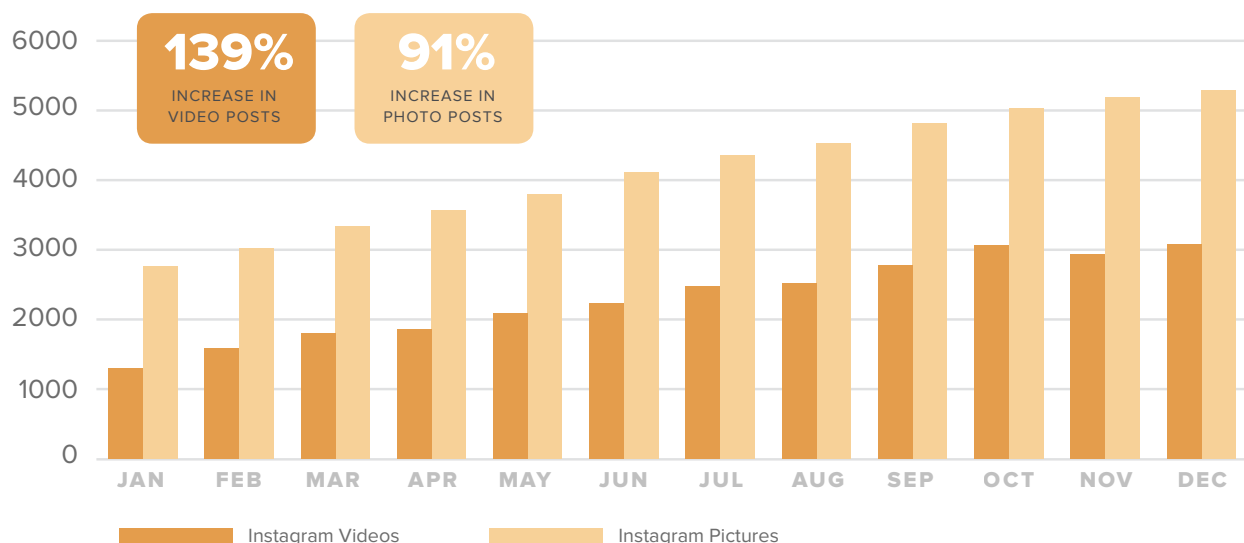
⁶ <http://blog.business.instagram.com/post/120537653811/the-next-steps-for-ads-on-instagram-new-formats>

⁷ <https://about.pinterest.com/en/buy-it-pinterest>

⁸ <https://blog.twitter.com/2015/introducing-autoplay-video-and-a-new-standard-for-viewability>

⁹ <http://newsroom.fb.com/news/2014/09/the-latest-on-facebook-video/>

GRAPH 3 Number of Brands Posting Pictures vs. Videos on Instagram (2015)



On this front, our analysis offers a leading indication that brands are trying to deliver richer in-platform content. On Instagram, for example, growth in the number of brands posting video content outpaced growth in the number of brands posting photos (139 percent versus 91 percent) across 2015 (see Graph 3).

However, creating platform-specific content involves more than simply posting an extra video or two. Platform-specific content is content created specifically for a particular social network or channel (i.e. blogs, email, etc.), delivered in the optimal medium for that channel (i.e. video, gifs, link post, etc.), and tailored to the ideal specifications for that platform (i.e. optimum word count, dimensions, etc). The optimum number of clicks required to glean real value from platform-specific content? Zero. The onus is on brands to entice and engage up front. Immediate and immersive content is the ideal.

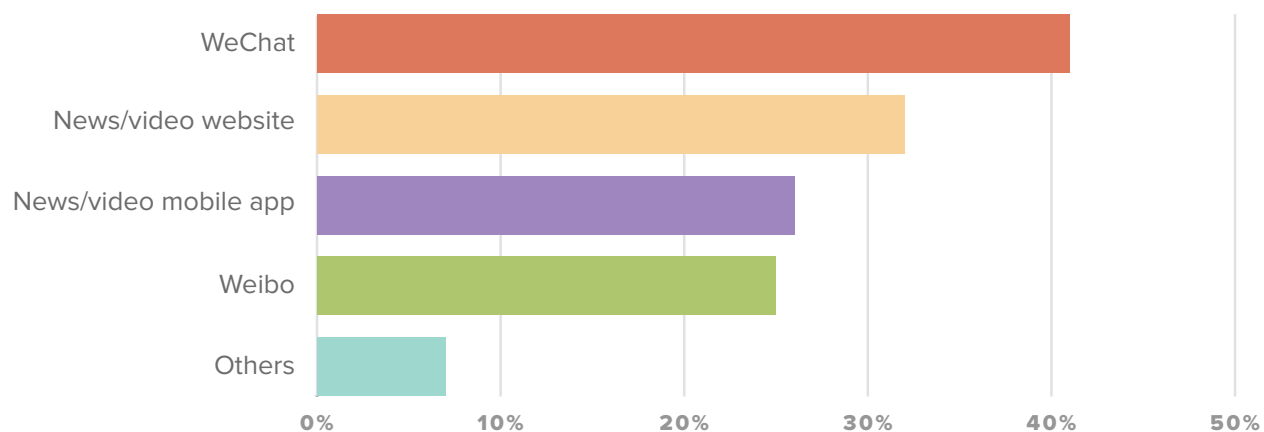
Why the urgency around platform-specific content? Just look to China, the largest Internet market by population, to see what the next wave in mobile content delivery looks like.

In China, Tencent's platform, WeChat, launched in January 2011 as a mobile messaging app, but quickly adapted to include capabilities for video media, food delivery, taxi services, payment and ecommerce, and more.¹⁰ Within five years of its launch, WeChat amassed half of the country's population (650 million) as monthly active users.¹¹

¹⁰ <https://walkthechat.com/mary-meekers-internet-report-wechat-highlights/>

¹¹ <https://www.techinasia.com/5-years-of-wechat>

GRAPH 4 "Under the Dome" Viewer Distribution by Channel

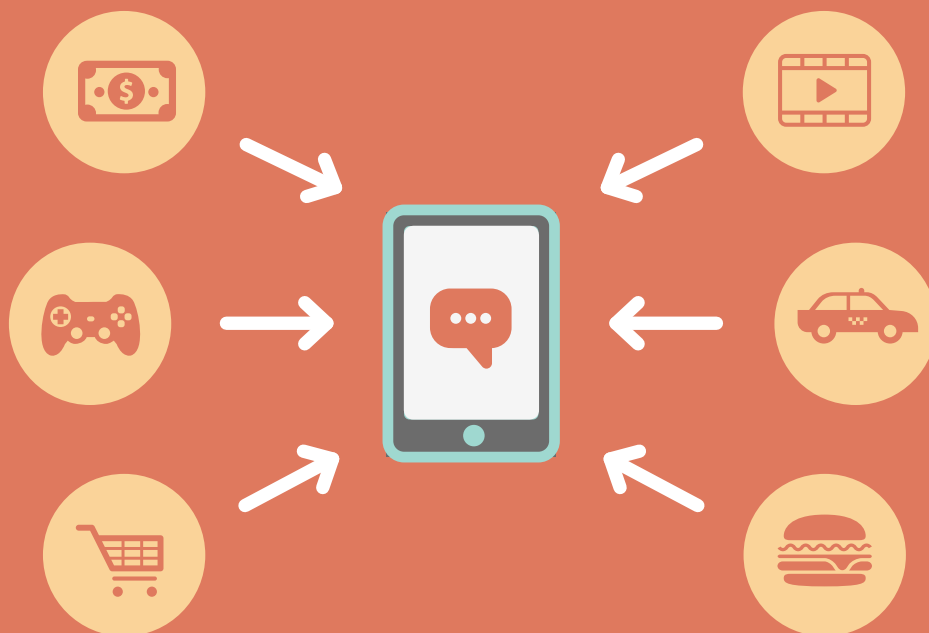


WeChat's broad audience adoption and robust in-platform content delivery capabilities laid the groundwork for an unprecedented content marketing event. In 2015, WeChat organically delivered 200 million views of "Under the Dome," a self-financed, long-form documentary (103 minutes) investigating smog in China, within three days of its release.¹²

Yes, in this age of fractured attention, where conventional marketing wisdom advises us to keep video content to 90 seconds or fewer, a 103-minute documentary about smog organically reached an audience of 200 million. In fact, WeChat accounted for the lion's share of views of the documentary, more than traditional news and web sources (see Graph 4).

The bottom line: Platform-specific content is a marketer's firepower against both headwinds (monetization and mobile). Social networks are adapting to promote greater in-app time and activity (which, if successful, incentivizes paying to play). To stay relevant, marketers need to create content that is well-suited for each platform and consumable with as few additional hoops — or clicks — to jump through. For marketing teams, creating custom content will require more intentional use of resources, more creativity, and more budget. But the teams taking the time to be intentional will outperform those that are spraying and praying every time.

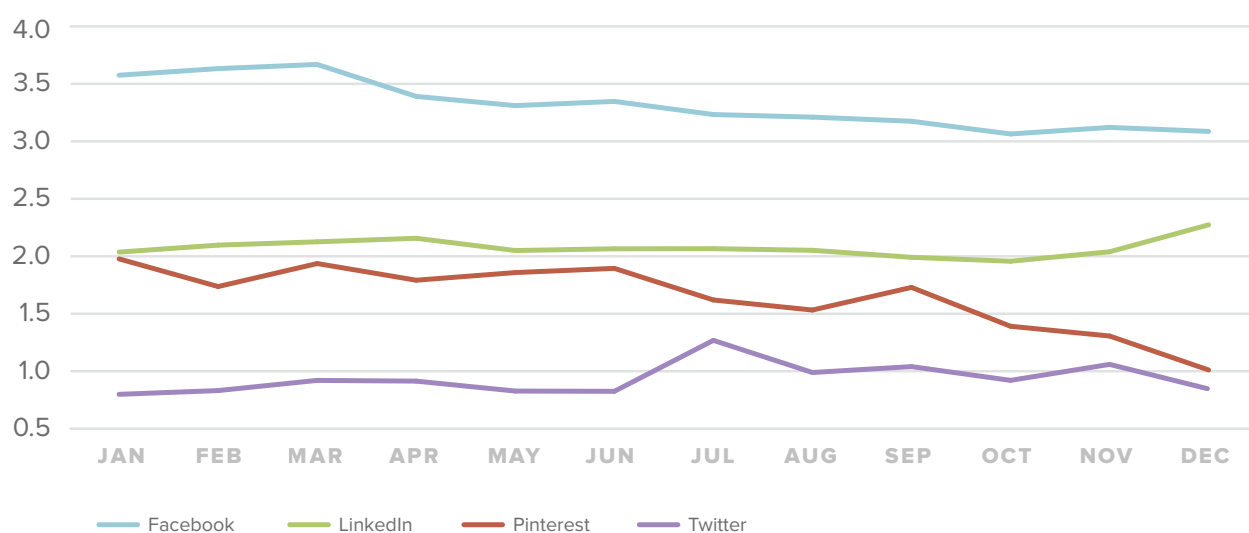
¹² <http://techcrunch.com/2015/05/27/the-mary-meeker-internet-trends-2015-report/#.ybyuncd:Zl4o>



03 Channel Trends: Engagement and Output on Social and Blogs

The graph below displays the engagement ratio per brand on five major social networks.

GRAPH 5 Interactions per Post per 1,000 Followers on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and LinkedIn by Month, 2015



Despite complaints about organic reach, Facebook's average engagement ratio is 3X that of Twitter.

Since our analysis includes both paid and organic content, this result could point to Facebook's successful monetization of its network, an area where Twitter continues to flounder. In other words, as more brands put up money to pay to play on Facebook, overall engagement per brand could hover at healthy levels on the network.

Beware the saturation moment on Pinterest.

Across 2015, Pinterest is the channel with the greatest drop in average engagement ratio among the major social networks. In fact, the average engagement ratio per post per 1,000 followers nearly cut in half, dropping 49 percent. Increases in the average number of monthly pins per brand (Page 14) could explain the growing difficulty to cut through the noise on this channel.

Brand engagement on LinkedIn remains steady, with end-of-year uptick.

LinkedIn's average engagement ratio is the most consistent of the major networks, hovering between 2-2.3 across 2015.

Instagram hasn't reached content saturation (yet).

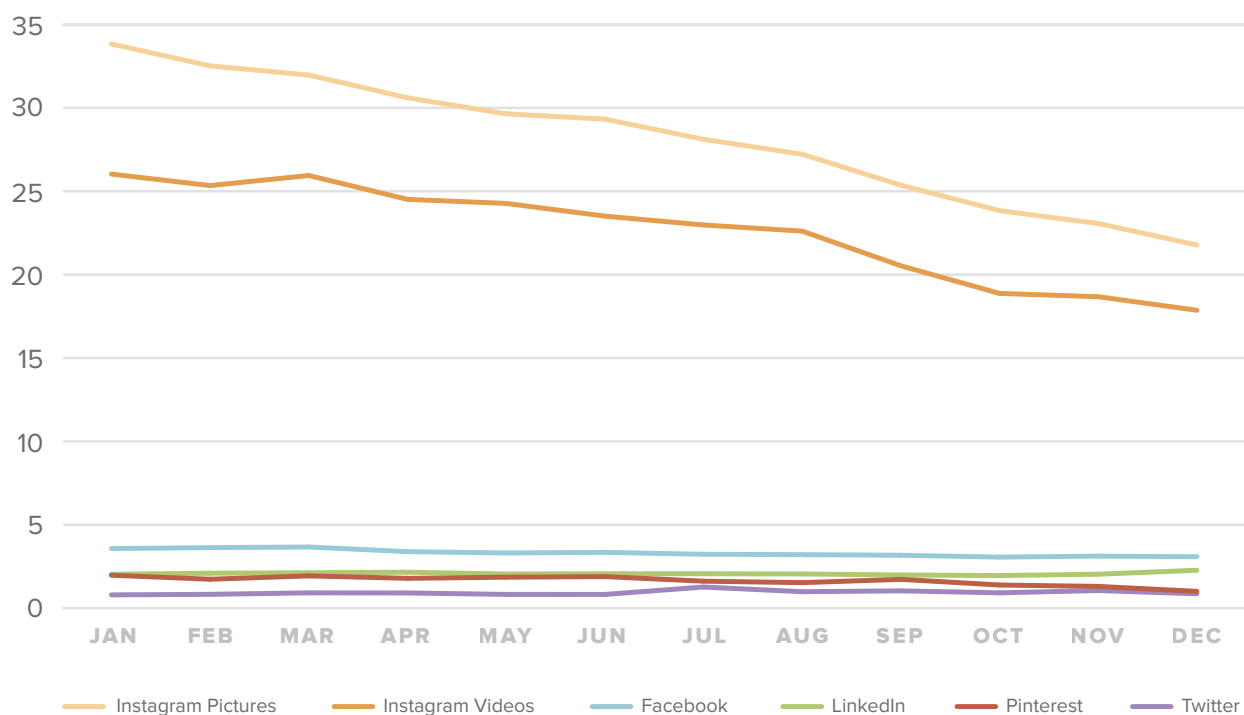
Let's continue our analysis of platform-specific content marketing by taking a closer look at the social network with the highest average engagement ratio for brands: Instagram.

In keeping with the results in our Content Marketing Paradox report, Instagram sports a much higher engagement ratio (interactions per post per 1,000 followers) than Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, or Pinterest. In fact, Instagram's engagement ratio is eight times greater on average. However, as Instagram matures, its engagement levels continues to cascade. The average engagement ratio with Instagram videos and pictures dropped 31 percent and 36 percent, respectively, across 2015 (Graph 6).

With Instagram expanding its ad platform to businesses large and small,¹³ we can expect the engagement ratio on this platform to continue to come down to earth, as it has on its older, monetized parent company, Facebook.

¹³ <http://blog.business.instagram.com/post/120537653811/the-next-steps-for-ads-on-instagram-new-formats>

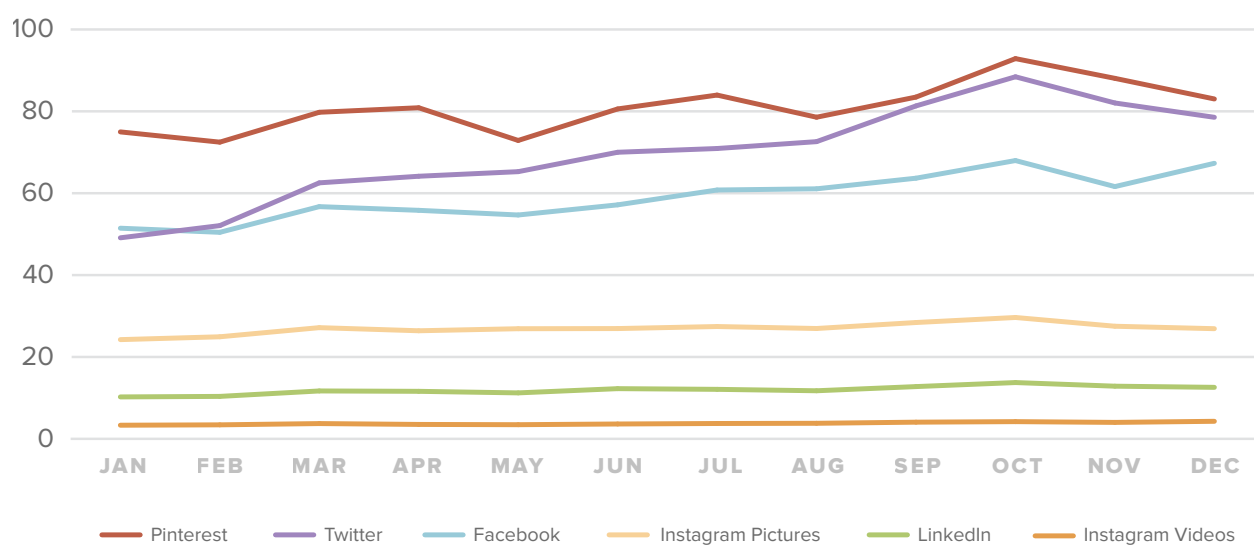
GRAPH 6 Instagram Interactions per Post per 1,000 Followers By Month vs. Other Networks, 2015



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Channel Trends: How Much Content Are Brands Creating?

GRAPH 7 Posts per Brand per Month on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, and LinkedIn by Month, 2015



Across 2015, the output of content per brand per channel increased on every major social network.

Twitter sported the greatest increase in monthly output per brand, rising 60% from a low of 49.1 posts in January 2015 to end the year at 78.5 posts per month on average. Facebook is second, with a 31% increase in monthly posts per brand across 2015.

Pinterest, Twitter, and Facebook are the highest volume networks.

Brands post between 72-92 pins per month — roughly two to three times a day — on Pinterest (including re-pins). If you're surprised to see Twitter in second place with 49-79 posts per month — roughly one to three tweets per day — note that our Twitter data does not include retweets or replies, which most commonly address customer service complaints on the network.

LinkedIn is the lowest-volume network.

On LinkedIn, brands post between 10.2 to 13.7 times per month on average, or roughly once every two to three days. Across 2015, the output in LinkedIn content per brand grew only 11%, tied with Instagram pictures. And while brands post only a handful of Instagram videos per month, posting Instagram photos is a near daily activity (24.2 to 26.9 per month on average).

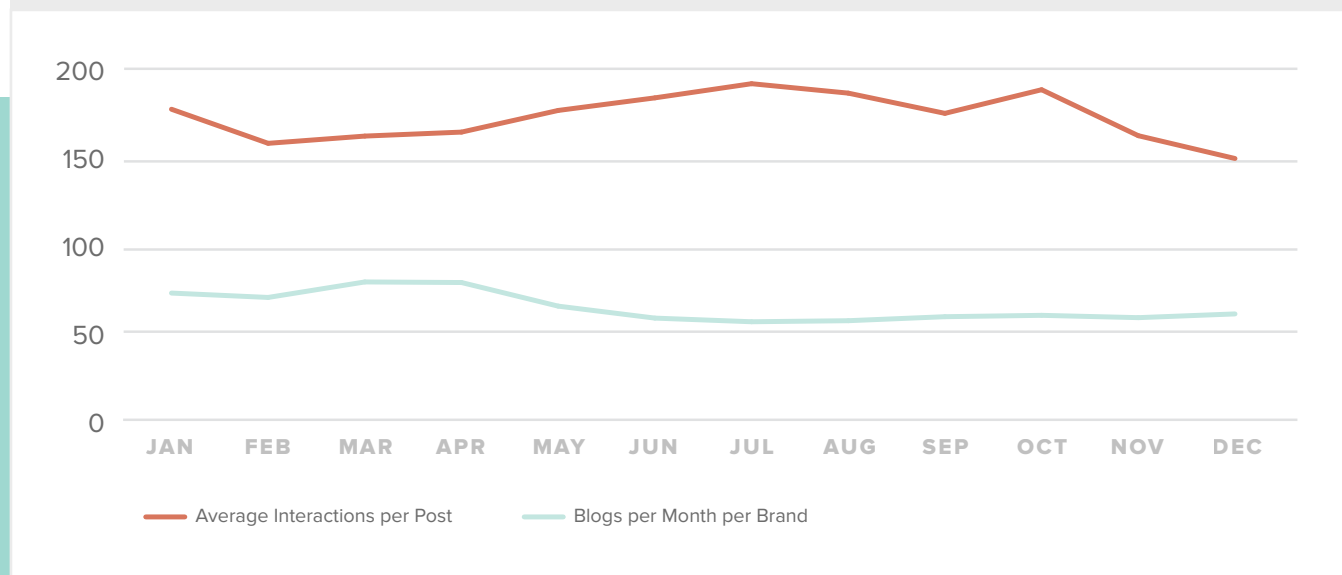
Beyond social: in the rush to “stay current” on new networks, marketers are neglecting their blogs.

While marketers have been busy cranking out more content on social, it appears they have forsaken their bread and butter: the blog. The graph below depicts the average number of social shares per blog post per brand (red) and number of blog posts per month per brand (blue) across 2015.

In contrast to the results on social, the average number of blogs per brand per month actually decreased by 16 percent across the year to a low of 58. Engagement with brand blogs, however, held steady, even climbing slightly to a peak of 190.7 average social shares per post in July 2015.

For marketers, this finding serves as a reminder not to neglect the basics in pursuit of that shiny social network. New digital platforms will come and go, but for now, the blog remains a reliable content hub from which to build your brand.

GRAPH 8 Average Interactions per Blog Post per Brand and Number of Posts per Brand by Month, 2015



16%

Percent decrease of the average number of blog posts per brand per month.

04 How the Best Marketers Are Outperforming the Competition

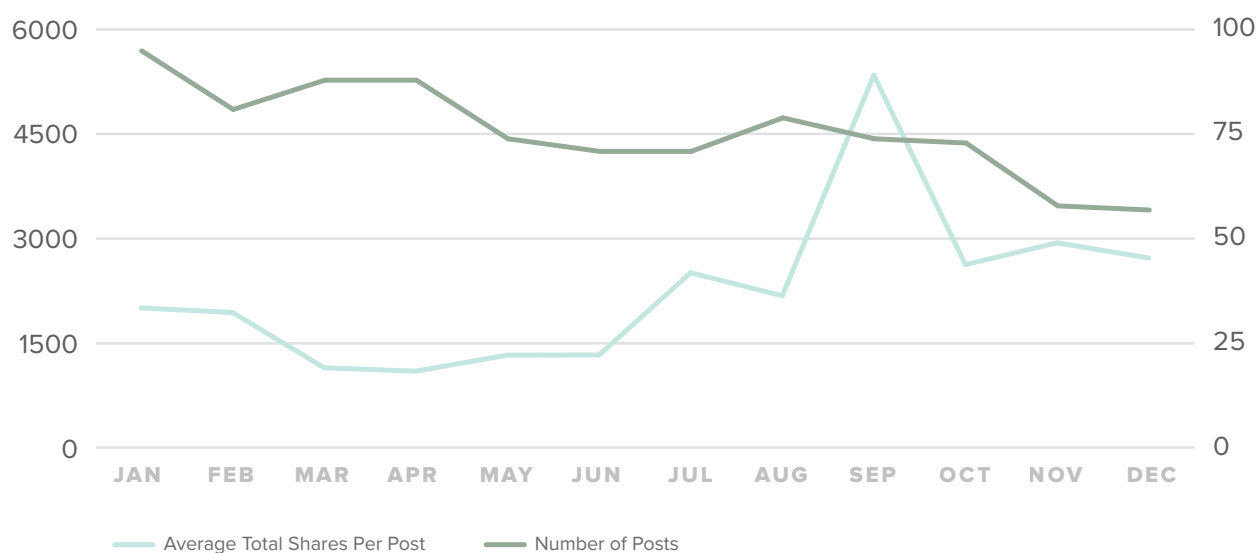
Here are two brands that outperform the rest with platform-specific content.

MyFitnessPal, the Under Armour-owned calorie counter and diet tracker app, is a channel-specific content marketing powerhouse.

In fact, myFitnessPal blows all key wearable and fitness app competitors out of the water, consistently accounting for an 80 percent share of interaction versus competitor blogs (see graph on the next page).

And across 2015, myFitnessPal successfully revved up its content marketing efficiency. The brand went from generating 95 blogs in January to only 57 blogs in December, but grew the number of average shares per blog post from a low of 1,101 in March to a high of 5,341 in September. That's a 40 percent decline in content that drove a 385 percent increase in shares across its channel mix.

GRAPH 9 myFitnessPal Number of Blog Posts and Average Shares per Blog by Month, 2015

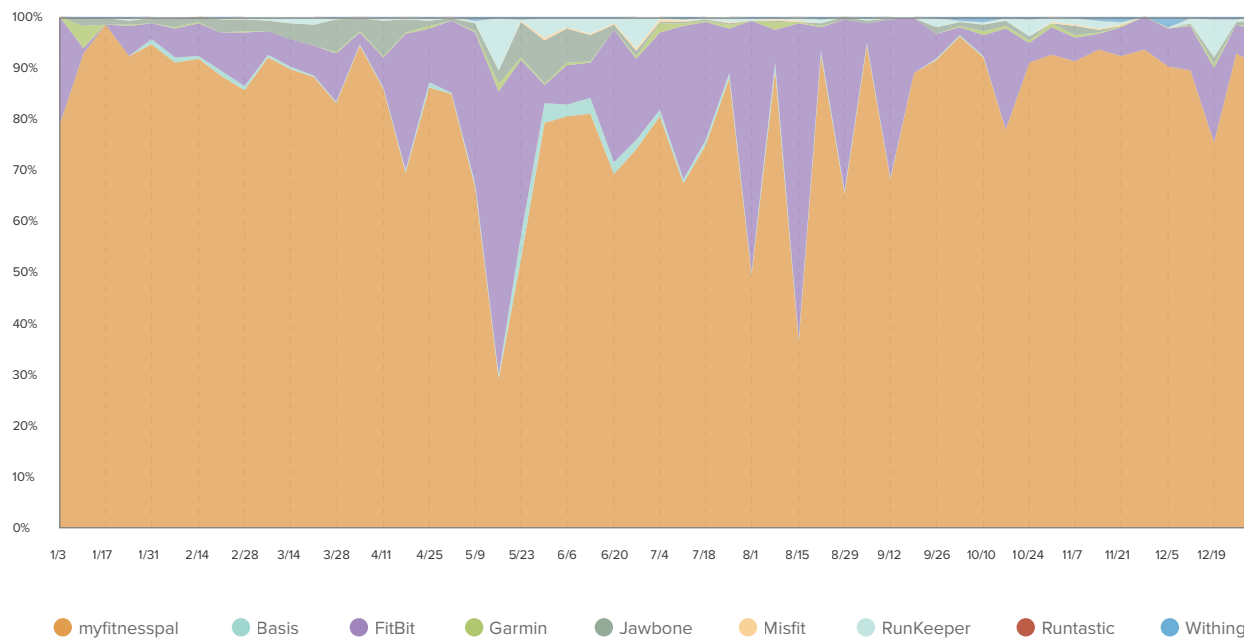


But the brand doesn't just spray each new blog post out across each channel.

Rather, myFitnessPal's distribution strategy is—you guessed it—platform-specific. MyFitnessPal posts [healthy recipes](#) on Pinterest, invites its audience to [fitness challenges](#) on its blog, and motivates them to stick with each challenge with regular updates to its [motivational quotes album](#) on Facebook.

MyFitnessPal vs. Wearables/App Competitors: Total Blog Shares (2015)

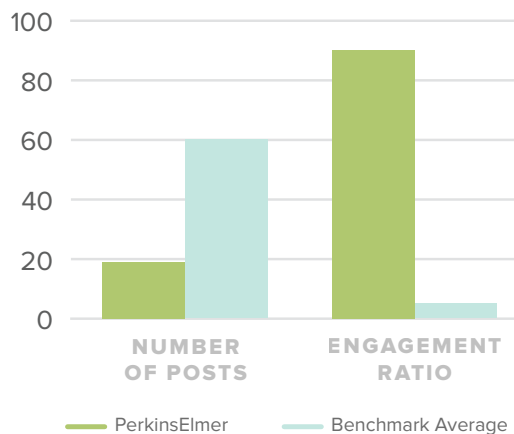
Exported through TrackMaven on February 1st, 2016



On the B2B side, a surprisingly innovative brand is PerkinElmer Inc., an American multinational corporation focused on solving issues in human and environmental health. That subject matter doesn't immediately sound sensational enough to stand out in a news feed full of cat videos and listicles, but take a look at how PerkinElmer honed its brand presence on Facebook in particular.

Across 2015, PerkinElmer saw an average engagement ratio of 89.45 interactions per post per 1,000 followers on its Facebook page while producing only 18.3 posts per month on average. Remember that industry wide, the average brand produced 59.1 Facebook posts per month but generated fewer than four interactions per post per 1,000 followers on average.

GRAPH 11 PerkinElmer vs. Benchmark Average Output & Engagement on Facebook, 2015



PerkinElmer, Inc. posted on Facebook. January 19th 2016 at 8:18:03 AM

There are four new cases of lung cancer every second. But this immunotherapy breakthrough brings new hope. <http://bit.ly/204YV8i>

<http://bit.ly/204YV8i>
Taking the Guesswork Out of Lung Cancer | Stories | PerkinElmer
 Novel test identifies lung cancer patients most likely to benefit from immune therapies

Like Comment Share

INTERACTIONS **15.2K**

This post had **5.98** times as many social interactions as the brand's average

f LIKES **15.1K** **f** COMMENTS **16** **f** SHARES **71**



Impact Score

One of PerkinElmer's top posts in 2015 made a breakthrough in cancer research personal and relatable. The results? Six times more interactions than the brand's average Facebook post.

THE BOTTOM LINE

There is no ROI in copycat content.

If your brand is just another voice in the feed, prepare to be ignored. Content competition is getting steeper, and social networks are becoming more sophisticated.

■ Not all social networks are created equal.

The social networks we know and love are growing up. Track your engagement and referral traffic on social to understand which channels and content perform best for your brand over time.

■ When a social network monetizes, the marketing meritocracy ends.

On networks that successfully grow and sustain ad revenue — like Facebook — paid content promotion will become a part of your playbook. Use engagement analytics to make sure you spend effectively and sponsor the right stories.

■ Content marketing efficiency is key.

MyFitnessPal and PerkinElmer prove it's possible to do more with less. Distinctive, channel-specific content is key.

■ Blogging is still a core competency for brands.

A well-executed blog can fuel your distribution strategy. Use social networks as a real-time feedback loop to identify the topics your audience cares about.



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