



Content 2018: How Top Businesses Approach Content Creation



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Introduction

As a business, you need content. It's your lifeline to your target audience. It's also one of the most effective tools to attract, engage, and retain your prospects and customers. And while there's been no shortage of content marketing studies in recent years, little if any research has focused specifically on how businesses approach content creation.

With this report, our aim is to fill that gap by providing insights into how some of the world's most recognizable brands develop their content. This includes the challenges they face, the strategies they use, and




the best practices they employ. To gain these insights, we conducted a survey in December 2017 of more than 250 content professionals from around the world. Among the respondents were content professionals from small businesses to major brands, such as IBM, Mastercard, Dropbox, Amazon, and Oracle.

In the pages that follow, we'll share the key findings from our research. We'll explore leading content professionals' top priorities, and the tactics they're using to develop high-quality content, at scale, that gets results.







Executive Summary

CONTENT PROFESSIONALS' TOP PRIORITIES ARE TO:

-  Demonstrate expertise and authority
-  Generate leads
-  Educate the market

TO ACHIEVE THOSE PRIORITIES, THEY SAY THEY NEED TO:

-  Have high-quality, error-free writing
-  Demonstrate thought leadership
-  Write with an engaging style and tone of voice
-  Offer how-to advice or instruction

BUT A VARIETY OF CHALLENGES CAN PREVENT THAT FROM HAPPENING:

- 54%** Aren't effective at creating high-quality content
- 66%** Aren't efficient at content creation
- 44%** Don't create enough content to meet business objectives

39%

Just **39%** of companies have enough content professionals in-house to handle all of their content creation needs. The rest outsource large portions of the work.

63%

63% of respondents say their content is created in silos, which can lead to issues with quality and consistency.

67%

While **67%** of companies have a corporate style guide, only 30% of those who do say it's closely followed.

51%

51% of respondents say their company's tone of voice is average or weak.

TO OVERCOME THESE AND OTHER CHALLENGES, CONTENT PROFESSIONALS RELY ON A VARIETY OF TACTICS:



THE MOST COMMON TYPES OF TECHNOLOGIES BEING USED ARE:



Content creation and optimization software



Organizational tools



Artificial intelligence





Who Responded to Our Survey?

At a Glance:

253 Content professionals

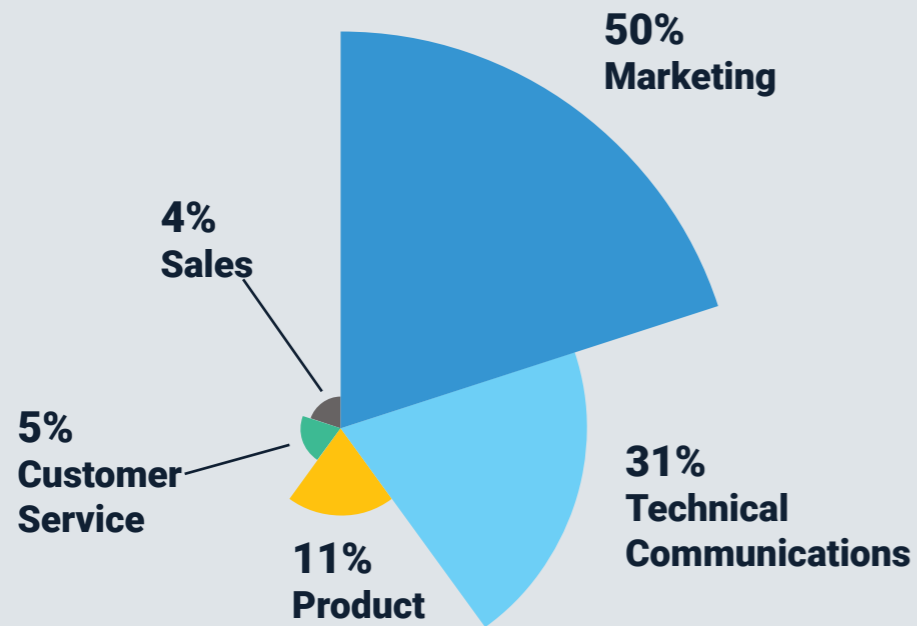


Mostly marketers and technical communicators

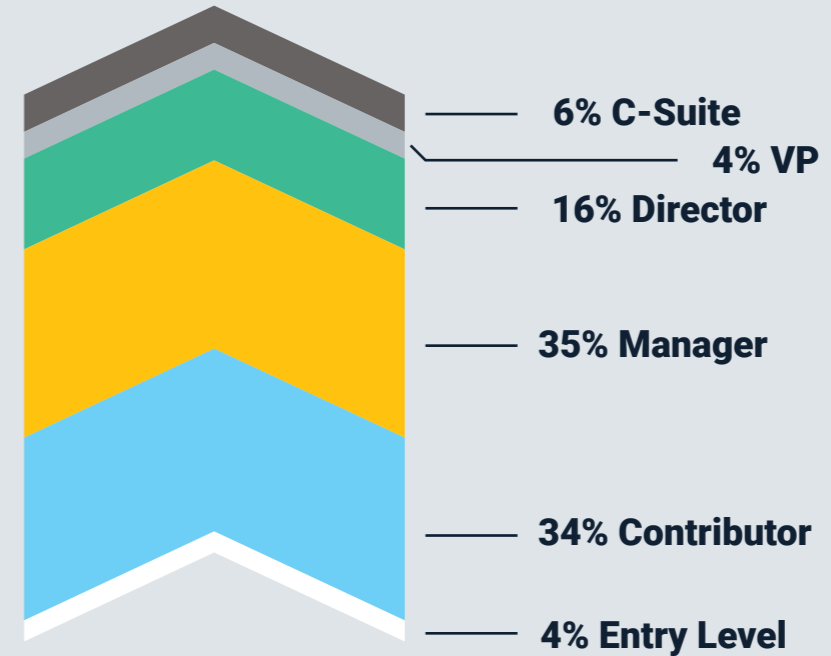


From small businesses through to enterprises

Department



Job level



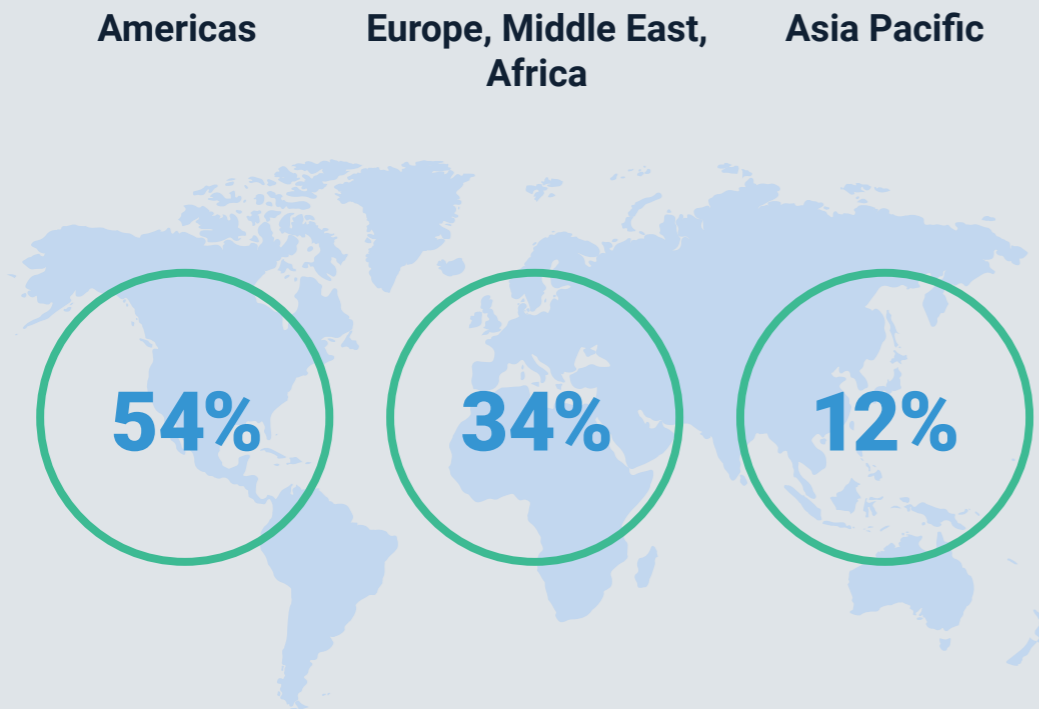
A total of 253 content professionals participated in our survey. They spanned a variety of industries and geographies, company sizes, job functions, and levels of seniority.

The vast majority of respondents said they either work within marketing (50 percent) or technical communications teams (31 percent). And while we had respondents from the entry level all the way up to the C-Suite, most were mid-level professionals – typically in managerial or individual contributor roles. We believe it’s the people in these mid-level positions who are the true content practitioners within their organizations. They are, therefore, best positioned to share practical insights into how those organizations create content.

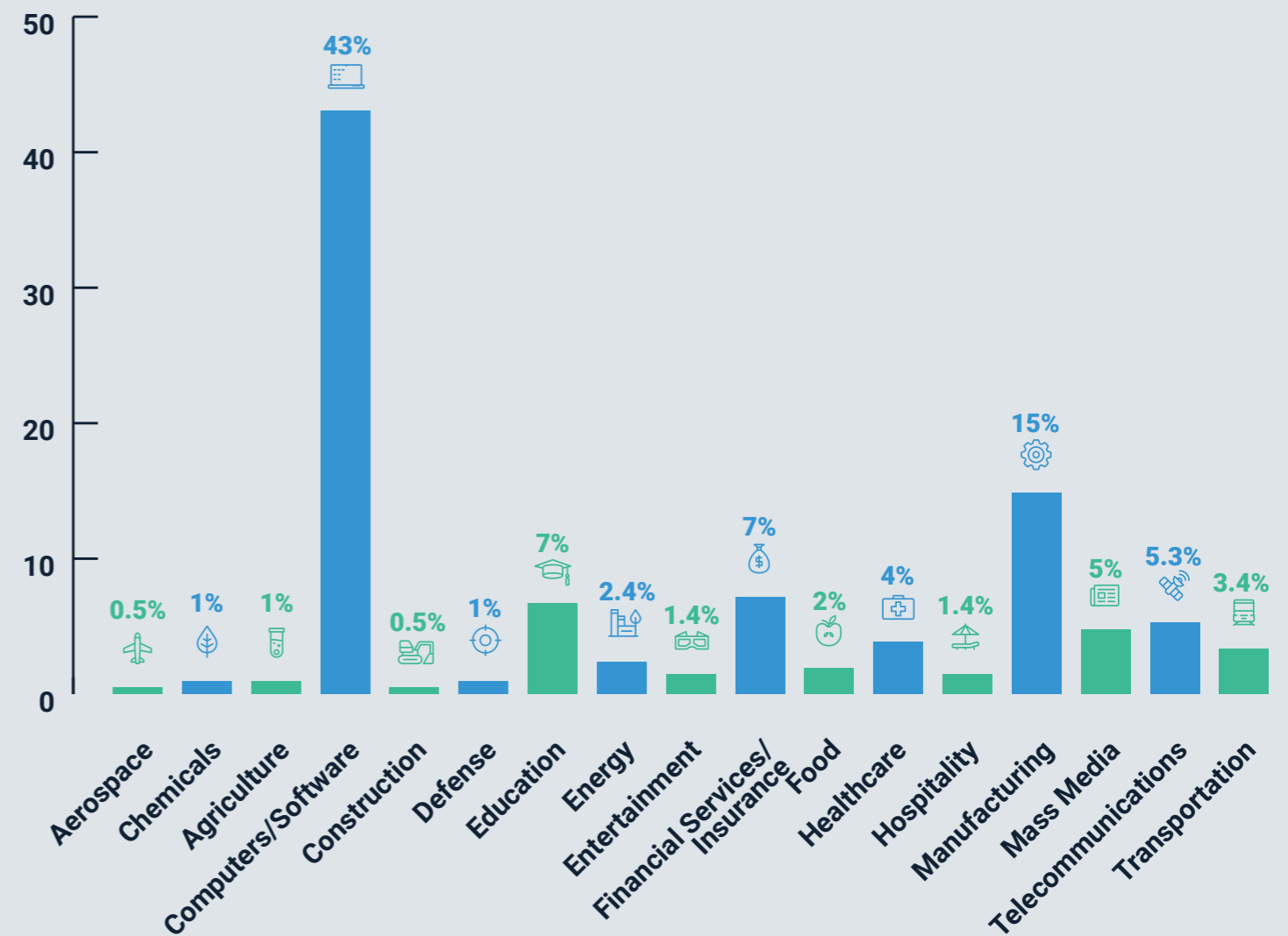
The survey drew participation from around the world and attracted respondents from 17 different industries – most notably software, manufacturing, and financial services and insurance. While many of the companies were either relatively small, with annual revenues of less than \$10 million, or quite large with more than \$1 billion in revenue per year,

most were somewhere in between. The budgets that respondents had at their disposal for content creation were equally varied. While most indicated having less than \$50,000 for content creation company-wide, approximately 8 percent reported having large annual content creation budgets of \$10 million or more.

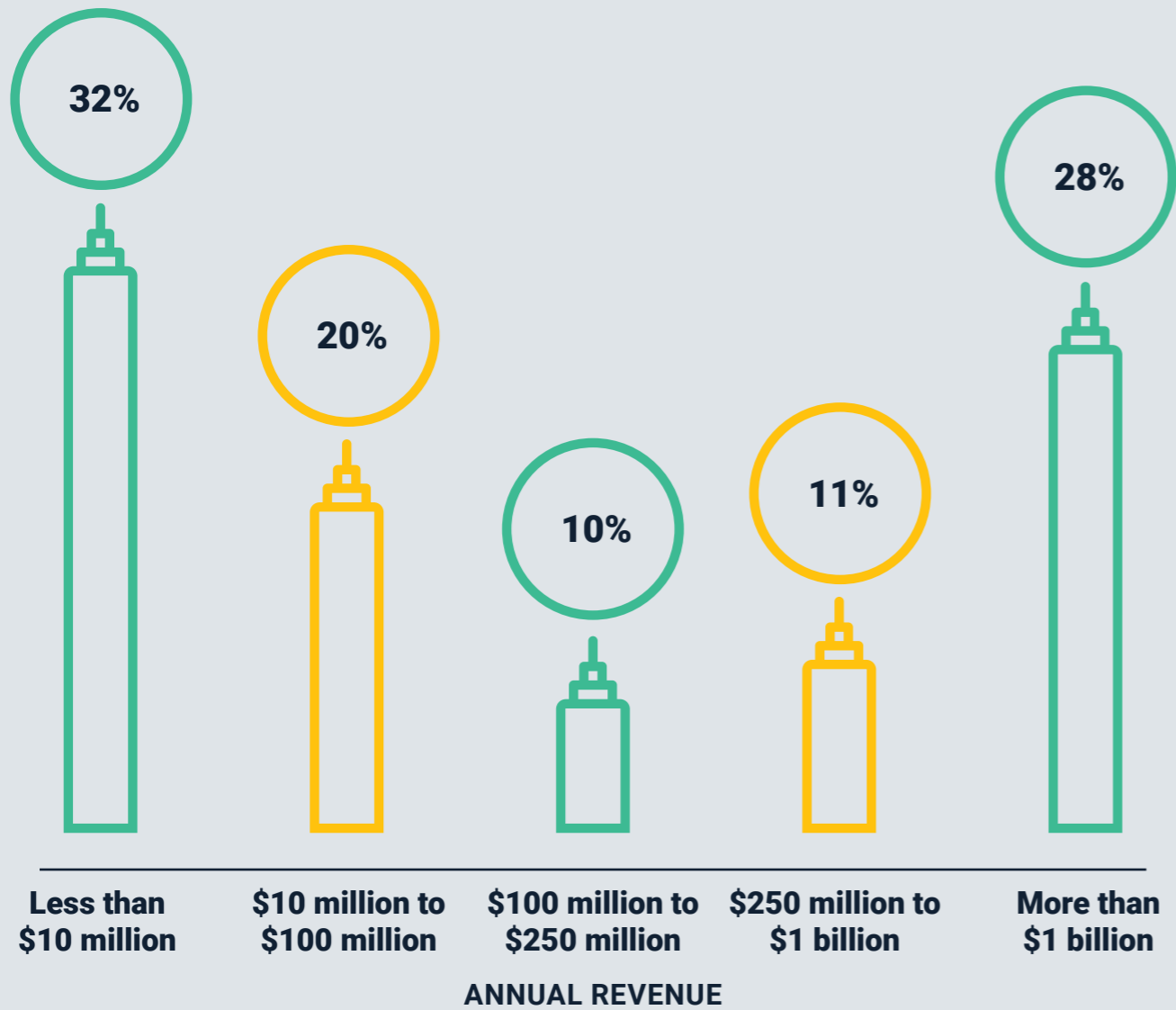
Company headquarters



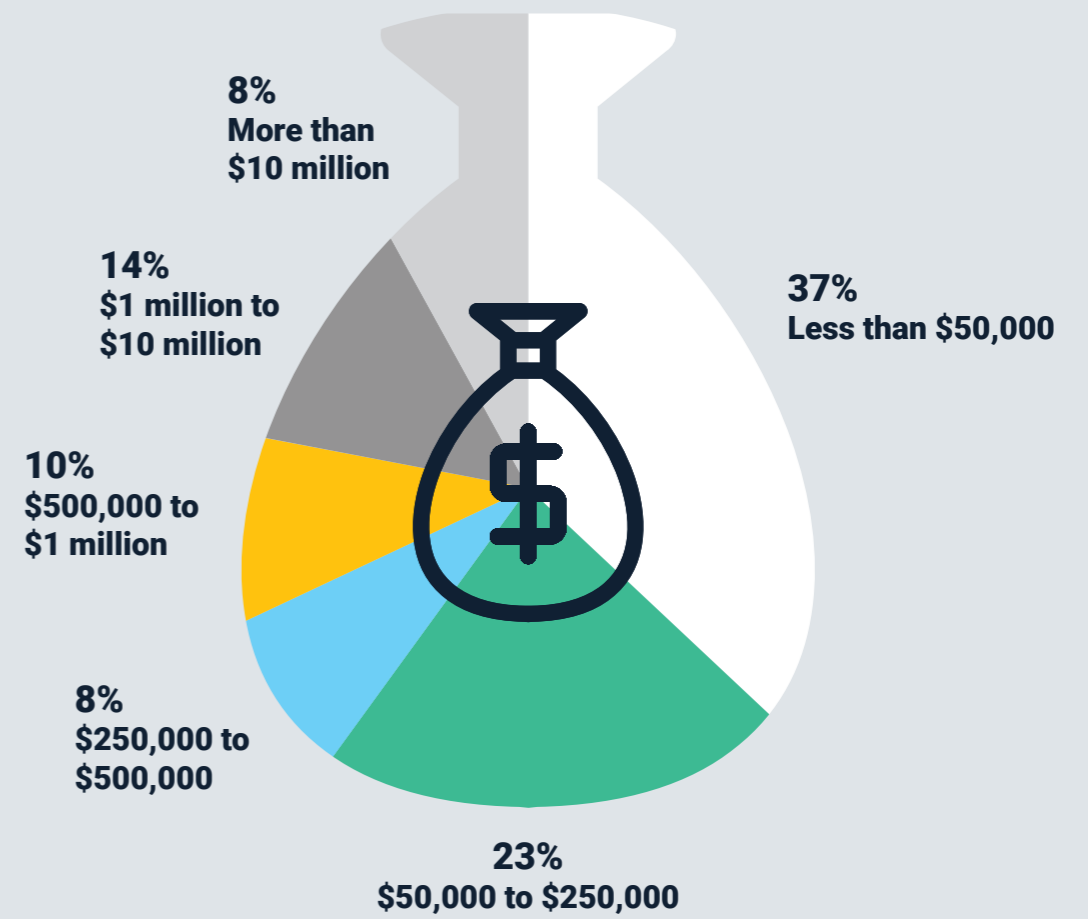
Industry



Company size



Annual content creation budget (company-wide)





What Are Content Creators' Top Priorities for 2018?

At a Glance:



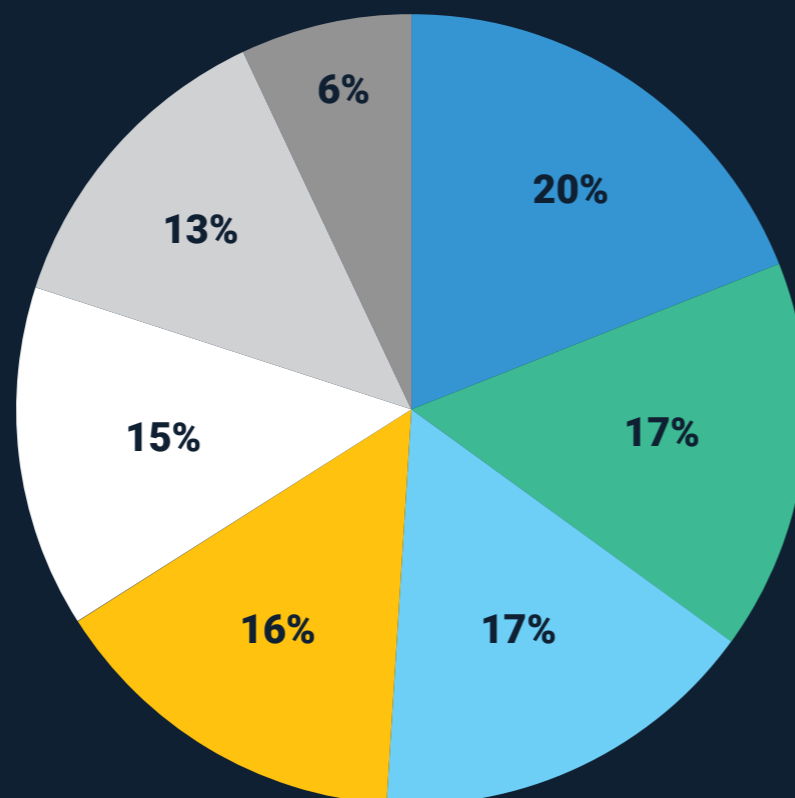
High-quality, error-free writing is the key to creating content that demonstrates authority, generates leads, and educates the market.



They want to ensure their content demonstrates expertise and authority, generates leads, and educates the market.

This reality may reflect the higher-level expectations that many companies now have for their content. Increasingly, businesses recognize it's essential for higher-level goals, such as demonstrating credibility and driving revenue, rather than just tactical objectives, like driving traffic.

Content professionals' top goals for their content



- Demonstrate expertise and authority
- Generate leads
- Educate the market
- Build trusted relationships with your audience
- Sell products and/or services
- Increase web traffic
- Raise brand awareness



When we asked respondents what factors are most important in terms of creating content capable of meeting those objectives, the most common response was having high-quality, error-free writing. This was followed by ensuring that the content offers how-to advice or instruction, provides thought leadership, and is written with an engaging style and tone of voice.

All of this suggests that while many content creators allow themselves to get distracted by other things – whether that’s finding just the right image or agonizing over the perfect headline – good writing that provides substantive information and guidance is what actually matters most. Of course, creating high-quality content that meets these goals is often easier said than done. That’s particularly true when you’re operating at scale, with lots of contributors across departments, and creating large volumes of content.

The most important factors for creating successful content

- ✓ **31%** High-quality, error-free writing
- ✓ **19%** Giving how-to advice or instruction
- ✓ **12%** Providing thought leadership
- ✓ **11%** An engaging style and tone of voice
- ✓ **10%** Offering original research
- ✓ **8%** Ensuring that it’s visually engaging
- ✓ **5%** Creating long-form content
- ✓ **4%** Creating short-form content
- ✓ **4%** Catchy headlines, titles, and subject lines
- ✓ **3%** Sharing best practices



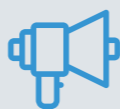


What Are Content Creators' Greatest Challenges?

At a Glance:



Many companies aren't creating enough content.



What they do produce is often inconsistent and lacks a strong tone of voice.

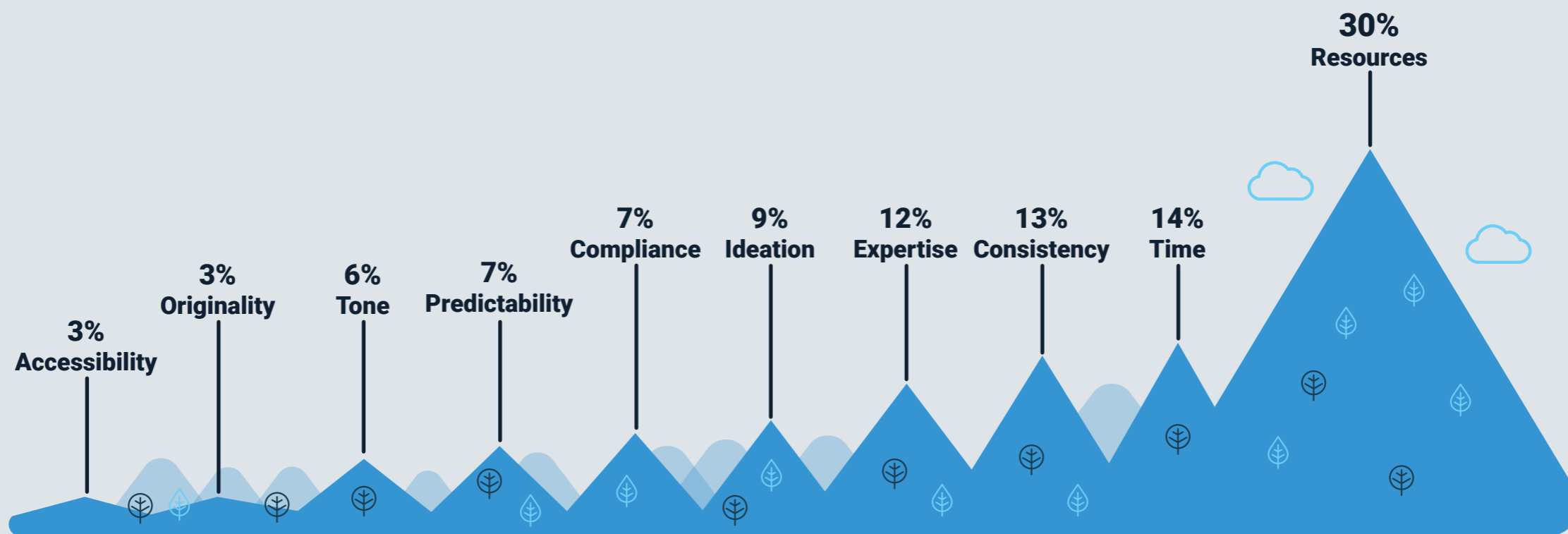


Inefficiency is a major driver of these issues.



Creating great content isn't easy, and most content professionals acknowledge that they face a variety of challenges trying to do so. Not having enough resources is the most common among them, cited by 30 percent of respondents. Interestingly, that was true both among content professionals with lean budgets and those with lots of budget dollars at their disposal. Other commonly cited challenges included a lack of time (14 percent) and trying to maintain consistency (13 percent).

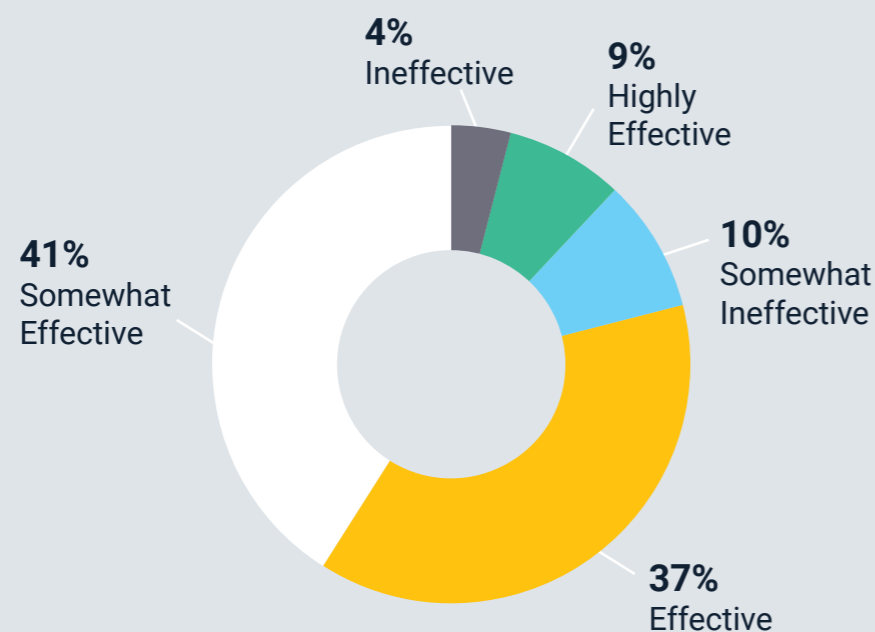
Top content creation challenges



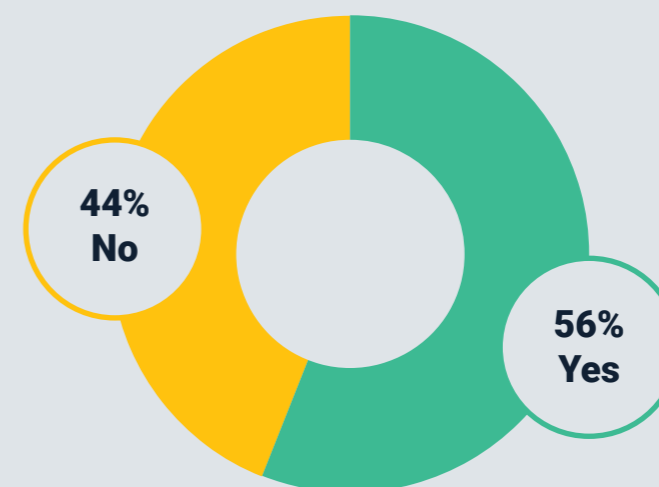
It's probably because of these and the other difficulties they face that more than half (54 percent) of content professionals acknowledge that they aren't as effective at creating high-quality content as they should be. Nor are they always able to keep up with demand. Approximately 40 percent of respondents noted that they don't believe they're creating enough content to meet their company's business objectives.

Effectively, what all of this suggests is that content professionals are under pressure to create a lot of content. In a number of cases, they're failing to make that happen, and the quality of the content they do produce is suffering as a result.

Companies' overall effectiveness at creating high-quality content



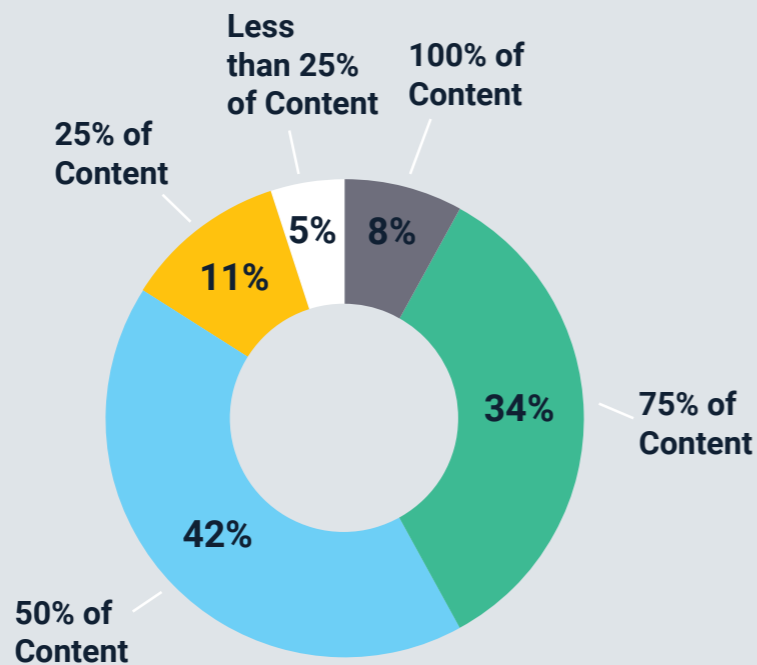
Whether companies create enough content to meet their business objectives



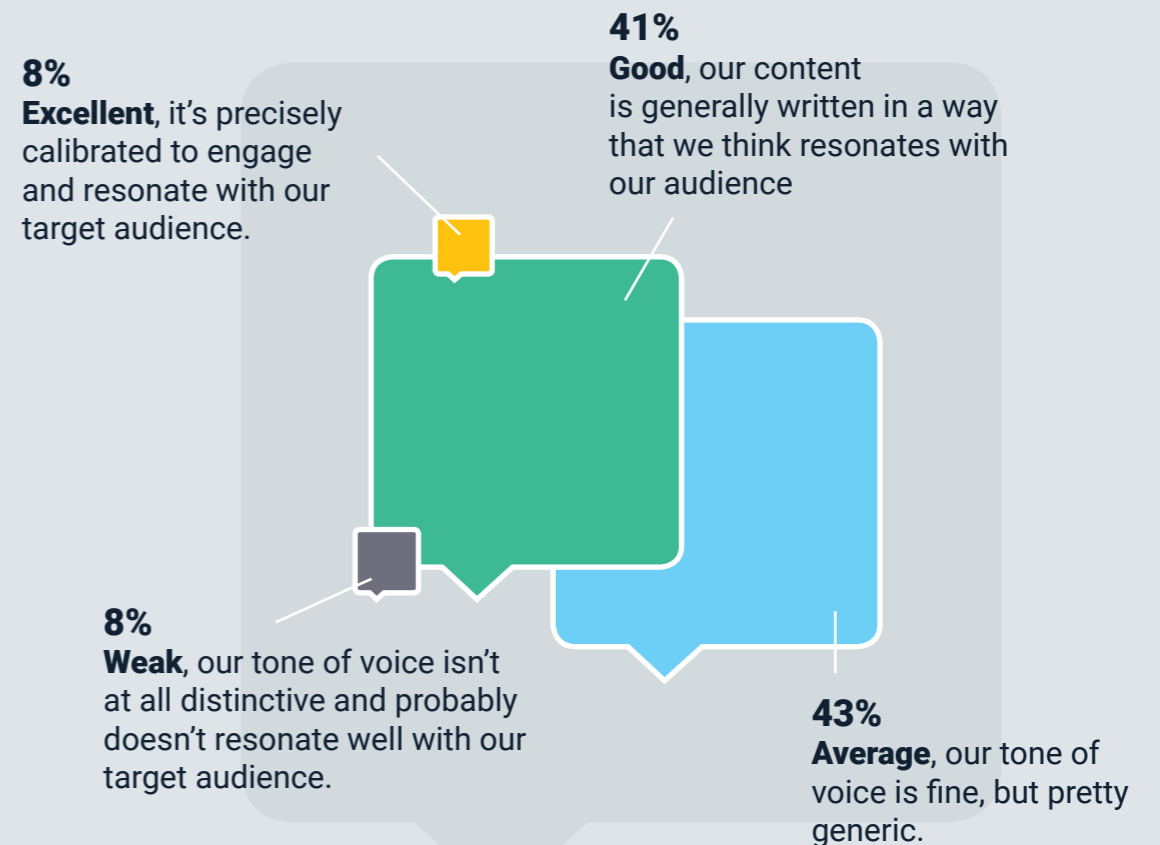
For the vast majority of content professionals, another challenge is ensuring that all of their company's content is written with a consistent tone of voice that accurately represents their brand. In fact, only 8 percent of respondents said all of their company's content is consistent, while the majority (58 percent) said less than half is consistent.

Respondents are also divided on the effectiveness of their content's tone of voice, with roughly half (49 percent) viewing their tone favorably and half (51 percent) not. All of this is important because having a consistent, finely tuned tone of voice is critical for creating content that's engaging, resonates with customers, and accurately represents your brand.

Percentage of content that companies create that has a consistent tone of voice that accurately represents their brand



Overall tone of voice effectiveness



We believe that the underlying issue at the root of these problems is a lack of efficiency. As we'll see, for most companies, content creation is a slow process. In fact, two-thirds (66 percent) of respondents described their content creation efforts as just somewhat efficient, inefficient, or highly inefficient. As a result, they wind up not being able to create enough content, sacrificing the quality of what they create, or both.

Over the long term, that can lead to serious problems. It can be difficult to attract and retain customers without enough content, let alone build meaningful trust-based relationships with them. Meanwhile, publishing lots of low-quality or inconsistent content can erode a brand over time.

Content creation efficiency

Content creation process = A — B





How Do Companies Create Their Content?

At a Glance:



Companies spend large amounts of time creating content.



That content is often created in silos or outsourced, leading to problems with consistency.











The Types of Content Companies Create

The most common forms of customer-facing content that the companies we surveyed create are articles and blog posts, followed by presentations and technical documentation. What's clear is that, in many cases, teams are spending considerable amounts of time creating their content. In fact, they noted that half of the types of content they create most often take 10 hours or more to produce.

Meanwhile nearly one-third (31 percent) of the content they produce takes over 20 hours to finish.

Practically speaking, this means that many content professionals are investing considerable amounts of time to create individual assets. And while that in itself may be fine, keep in mind that more than half don't think their content is as effective as it should be. This begs the question of whether their time is well spent.

Preferred content types

Type of Content	Degree of Difficulty	Average Time to Create
1 Articles / Blog Posts 	Very Easy	3-5 hours
2 Presentations 	Easy	6-10 hours
3 Technical Documentation 	Challenging	20+ hours
4 Newsletters 	Easy	3-5 hours
5 Videos 	Challenging	20+ hours
6 Websites 	Average	20+ hours
7 How-to Guides 	Average	20+ hours
8 Case Studies 	Challenging	10-15 hours



Type of Content		Degree of Difficulty	Average Time to Create
9	Infographics 	Challenging	3-5 hours
10	FAQs 	Very Easy	3-5 hours
11	White Papers 	Average	20+ hours
12	eBooks 	Average	15-20 hours
13	Checklists 	Very Easy	1-2 hours
14	Research Reports 	Very Challenging	20+ hours
15	SlideShares 	Easy	3-5 hours
16	User Generated Content 	Average	1-2 hours

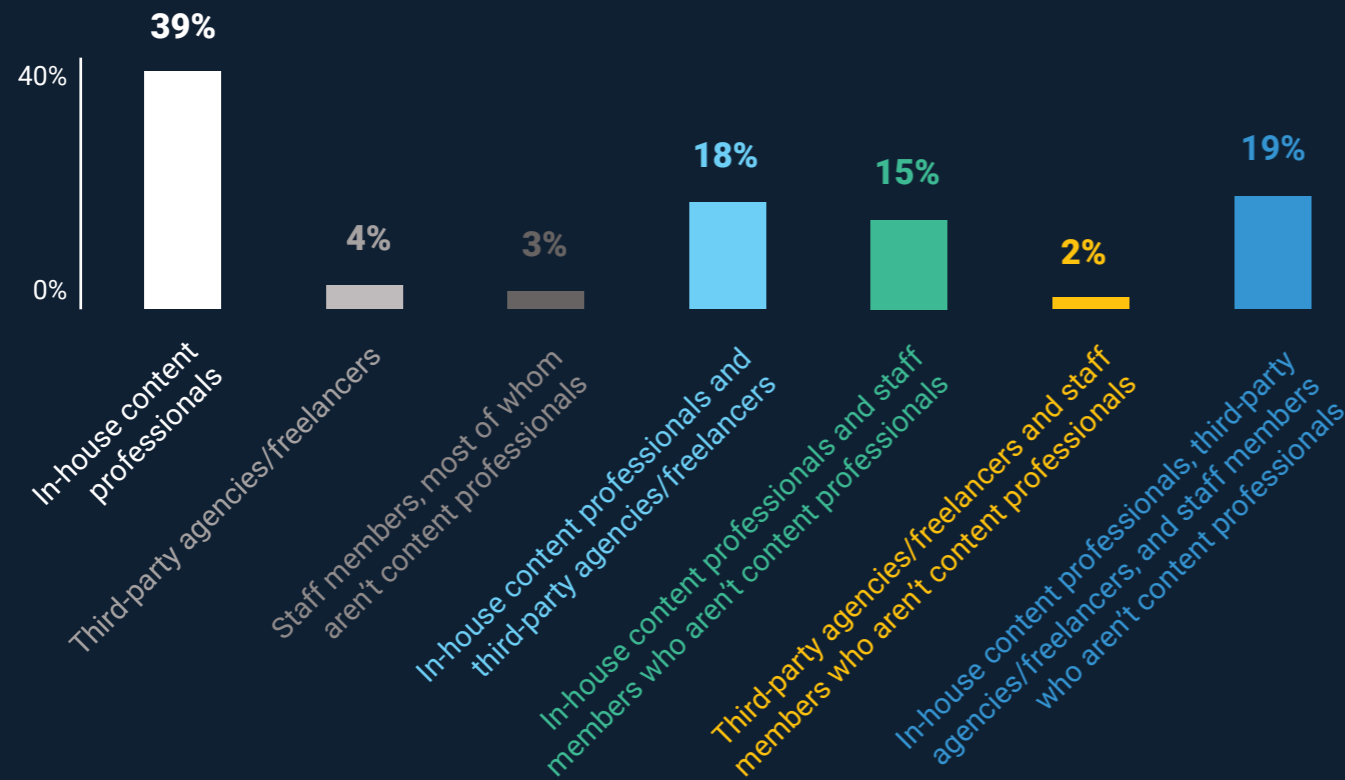


How Content Gets Created

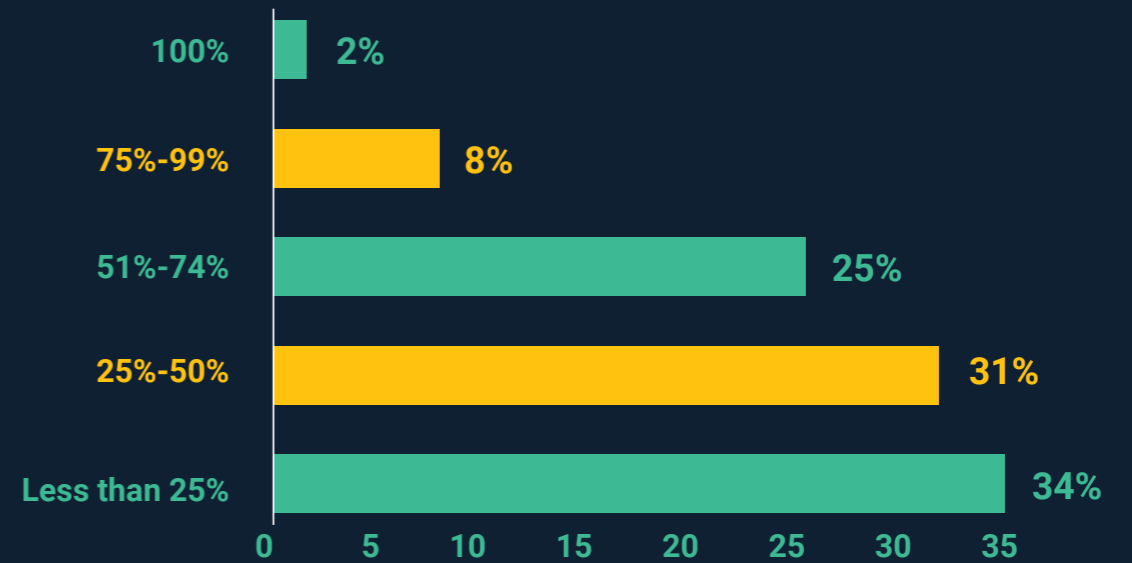
On average, nearly 4 in 10 companies (39 percent) have enough content professionals in-house to handle all of their content creation needs. Everyone else also relies on some combination of agencies, freelancers, or other staff for help. Smaller companies tend to handle their content creation in-house with professional writers, while larger companies likely leverage third parties to help supplement internal efforts.

And, among those companies that do turn to outside resources, two-thirds (66 percent) say they outsource as much as half of their content creation. One respondent even indicated outsourcing all content creation. This speaks to the fact that most companies rely on outside resources to help them scale their content creation efforts, presumably because doing so is more efficient or cost-effective than hiring more full-time content professionals. It might also help them to be more nimble.

Who creates customer-facing content



Percentage of content creation outsourced to third parties



Content that's created in-house is often produced by lots of different departments. In fact, 63 percent of respondents said that their content is created in silos. While understandable — particularly at big organizations with lots of diverse content needs — it's also problematic. That's because the more diverse teams you have creating content, the less likely that content will be consistent.

To try to get around this, roughly one-fifth (22 percent) of the companies where content creation is siloed funnel all of their content through a single department for quality control. Of course, this can be cumbersome because it adds an extra step and requires additional time and resources, which ultimately slows the velocity of the content initiatives.

Content creation: centralized vs. siloed



37%

Content is created by one centralized team or department.



22%

Content created by various groups but funneled through one team for review prior to approval.



41%

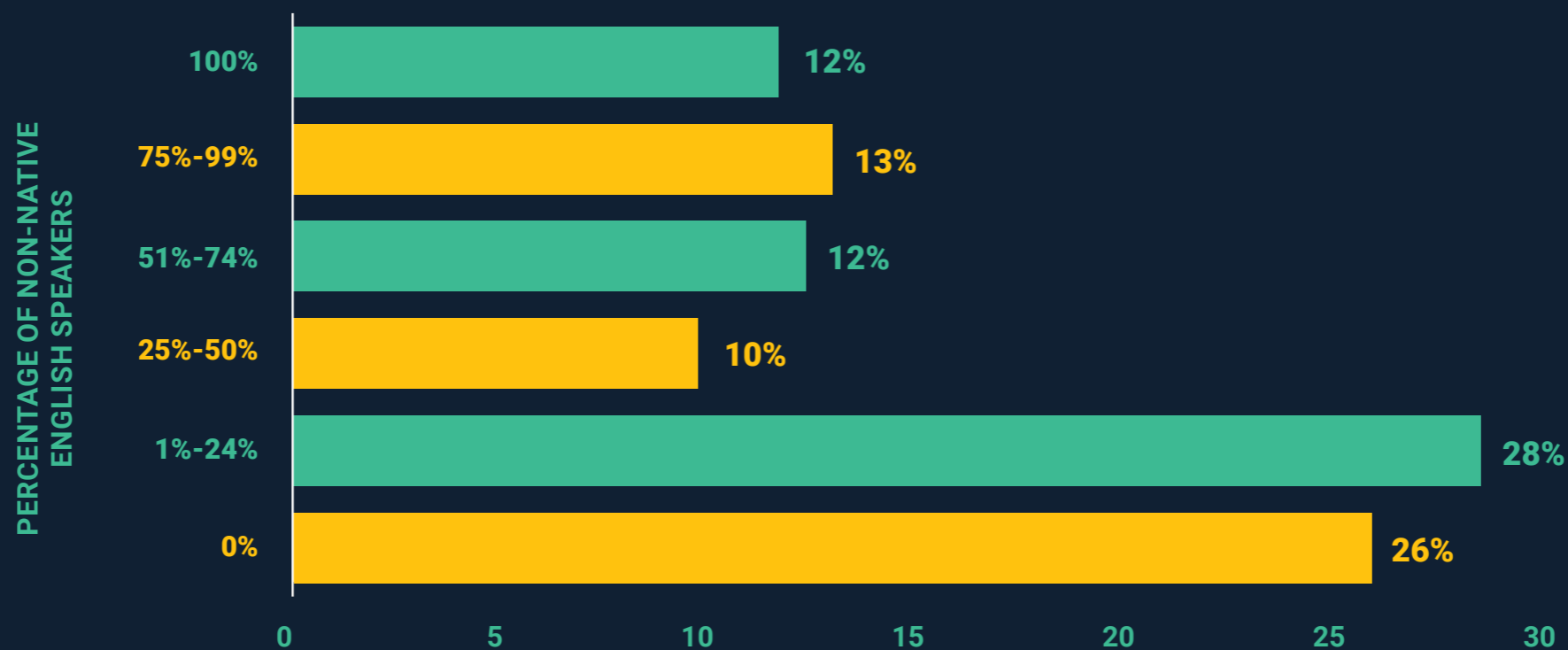
Content created in different silos with no single team having oversight of everything.



Further complicating things is the fact that nearly three-quarters (74 percent) of companies employ content creators who aren't native English speakers to create English language content. While hiring non-native speakers may be appropriate for any number of reasons, it does increase the risk for errors and, ultimately, could impact how well the content performs.

In today's global economy, many large organizations find talent in the overseas markets where they do business. While doing so can be a very cost-effective move, it can also have serious implications for content quality.

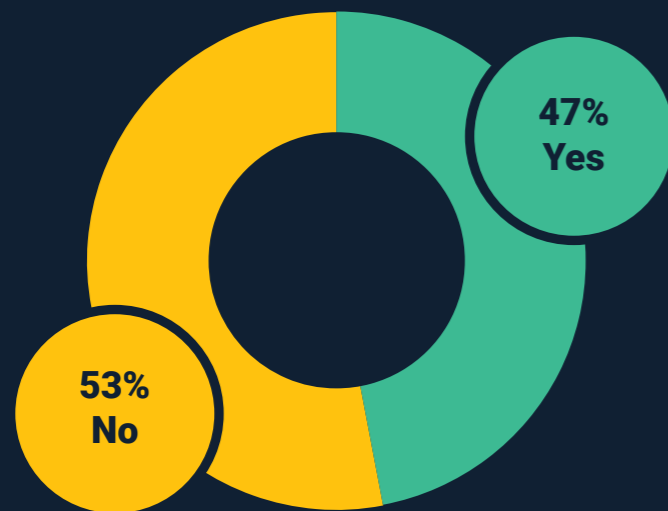
Percentage of content creators who are non-native English speakers



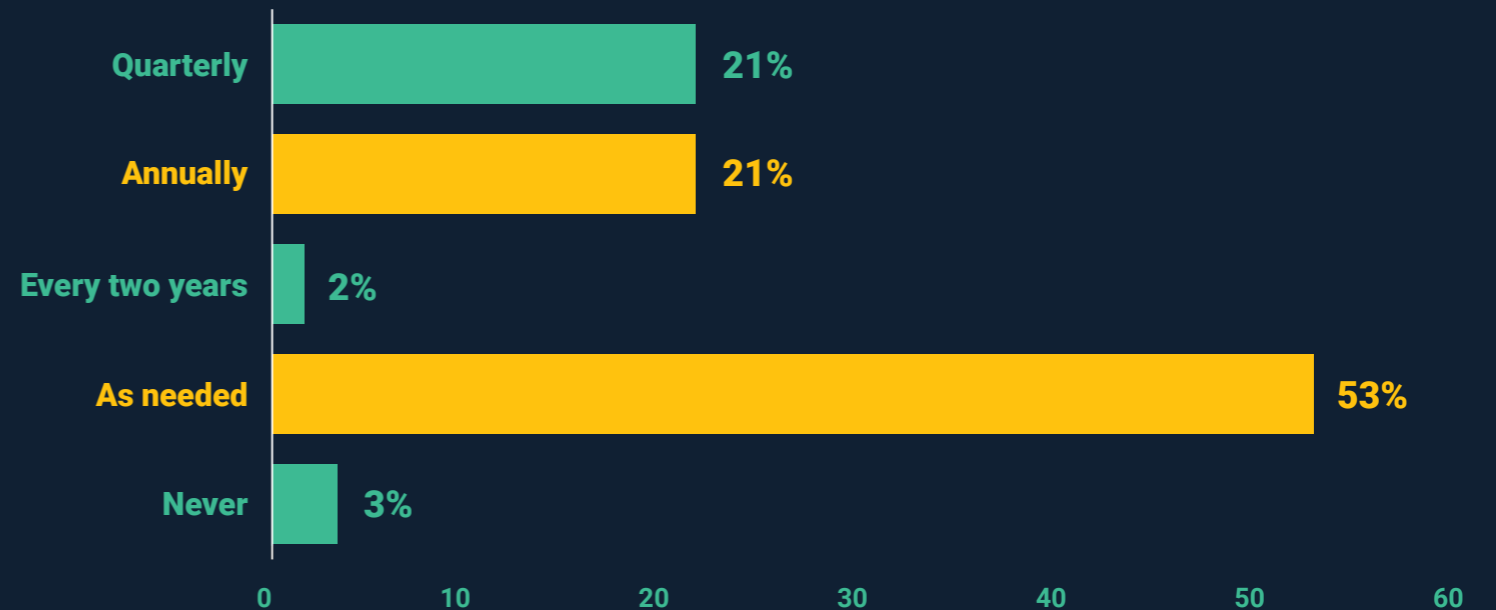
Content Processes

Roughly half (47 percent) of content professionals say they have a documented content strategy. Among those who do, about half of them (52 percent) update their strategy on an ad hoc, as-needed basis. Meanwhile, 1 in 5 updates theirs on an annual basis, with an equal number of respondents doing so quarterly. The fact that many content professionals don't have a strategy in place is alarming. Underscoring this point is the fact that those content professionals who do have a documented strategy are 65 percent more likely to create enough content to meet their business objectives.

Documented content strategy



Frequency of content strategy refreshes

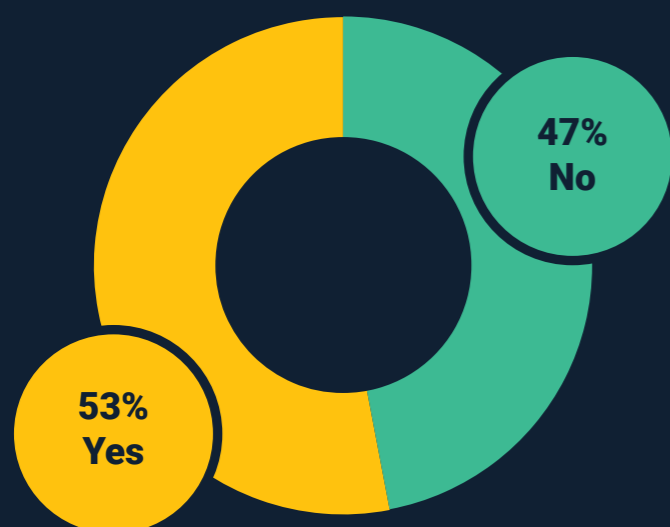


Likewise, less than half (47 percent) of respondents say that they have documented personas for which they create content. Among those who do, the majority (34 percent) target between four and five personas.

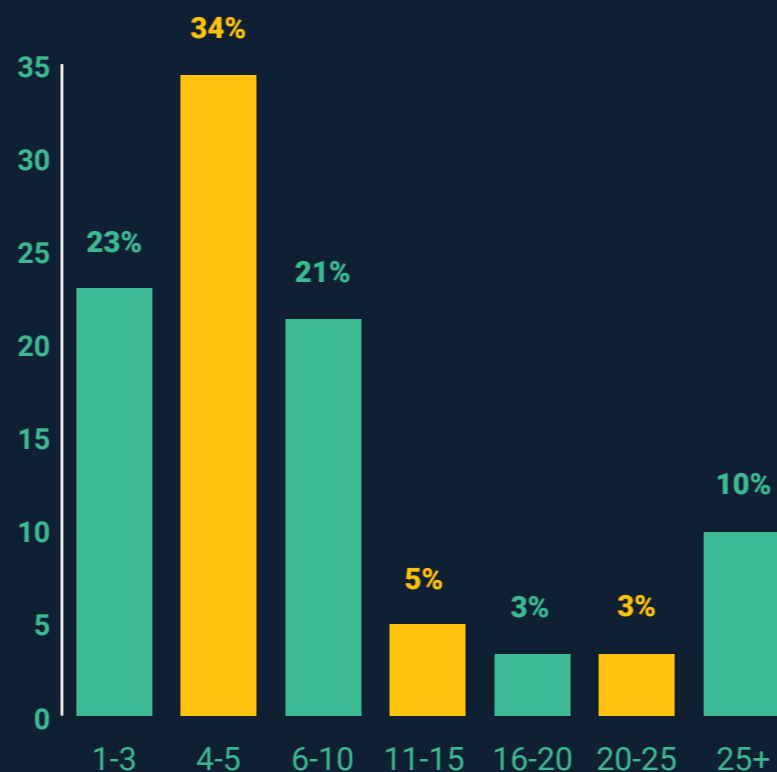
Astonishingly, 10 percent of companies target 25 or more personas. And yet, those who do create content for lots of personas feel more confident that they're adequately targeting each persona with sufficient content.

While only 35 percent of respondents who create content for five or fewer personas feel like they're covering each one sufficiently, 40 percent of respondents who create content for 25 personas or more feel the same way. This suggests organizations targeting lots of personas may be better equipped to do so because they have the necessary staff and resources.

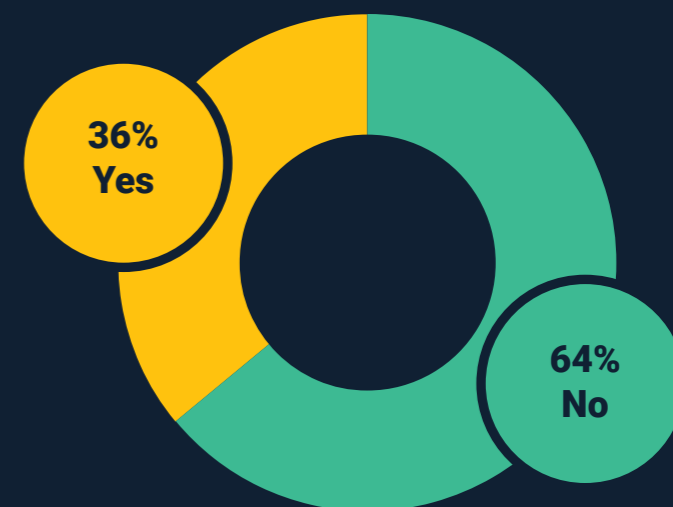
Documented personas



Number of personas



Creation of enough content to accommodate each persona



Maintaining Consistency

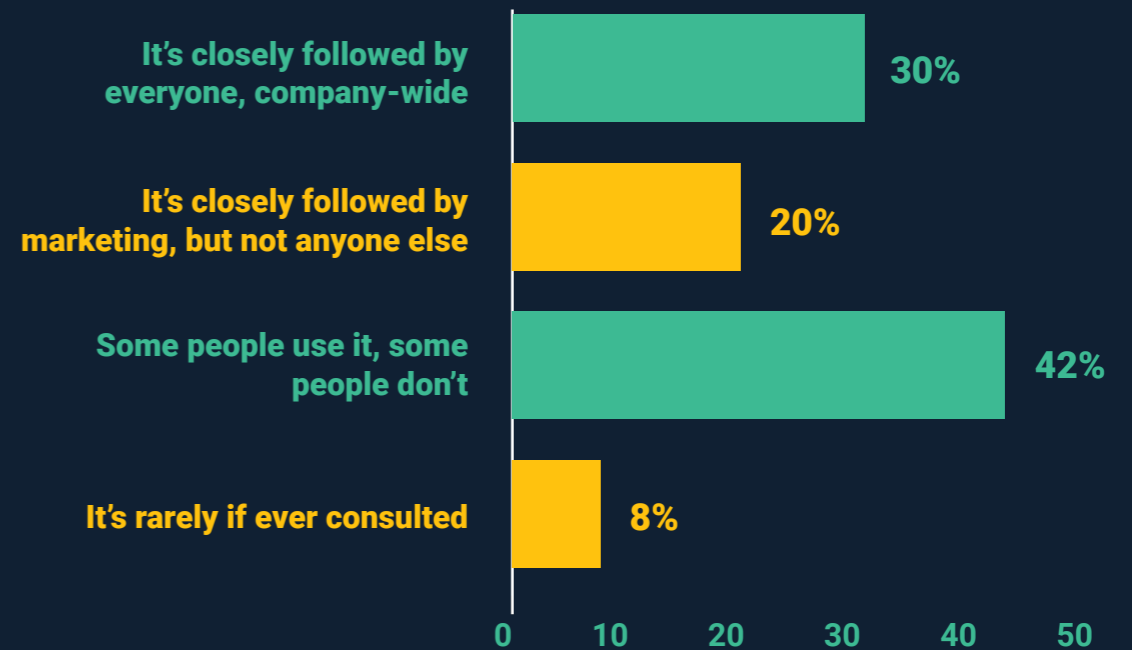
To maintain the consistency of their content, the respondents to our survey take a variety of different approaches. For example, more than two-thirds (67 percent) noted that their company has an editorial style guide. Meanwhile, some companies use a team of editors to review some or all of their content before it's published. Others rely on peer review.

The challenge is that many of these tactics are flawed. Just 30 percent of respondents with a corporate style guide say that it's closely followed by everyone in the company. In the majority of cases, it's much more of a mixed bag with just some people following it and others not. Hiring editors, by contrast, is costly and inefficient, with editors becoming potential bottlenecks in the process. It may be because of reasons like these that so many companies struggle to create consistent, high-quality content.

Tactics for ensuring content quality and consistency



Style guide adherence





How Do Companies Overcome Content Challenges?

At a Glance:



Leveraging technology and metrics are critical for success.



Following documented processes drives greater efficiency.



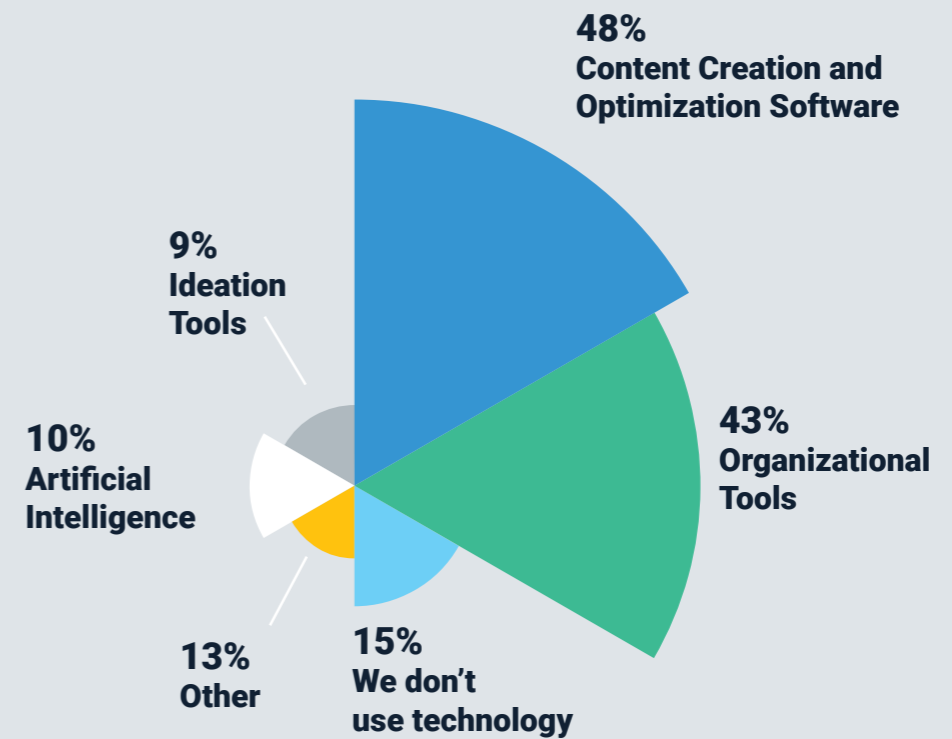
There are a lot of techniques that companies use to try to improve their content creation efforts. And while enlisting the help of more staff is the first tactic companies tend to turn to (cited by 39 percent of respondents), taking advantage of new technologies was the second most popular solution, cited by 25 percent of respondents.

Among the most commonly used technologies are content creation and optimization software (48 percent), followed by organizational tools such as Trello (43 percent), and artificial intelligence (10 percent). Interestingly, 15 percent of respondents noted that they don't use technology at all.

Strategies for addressing content creation challenges



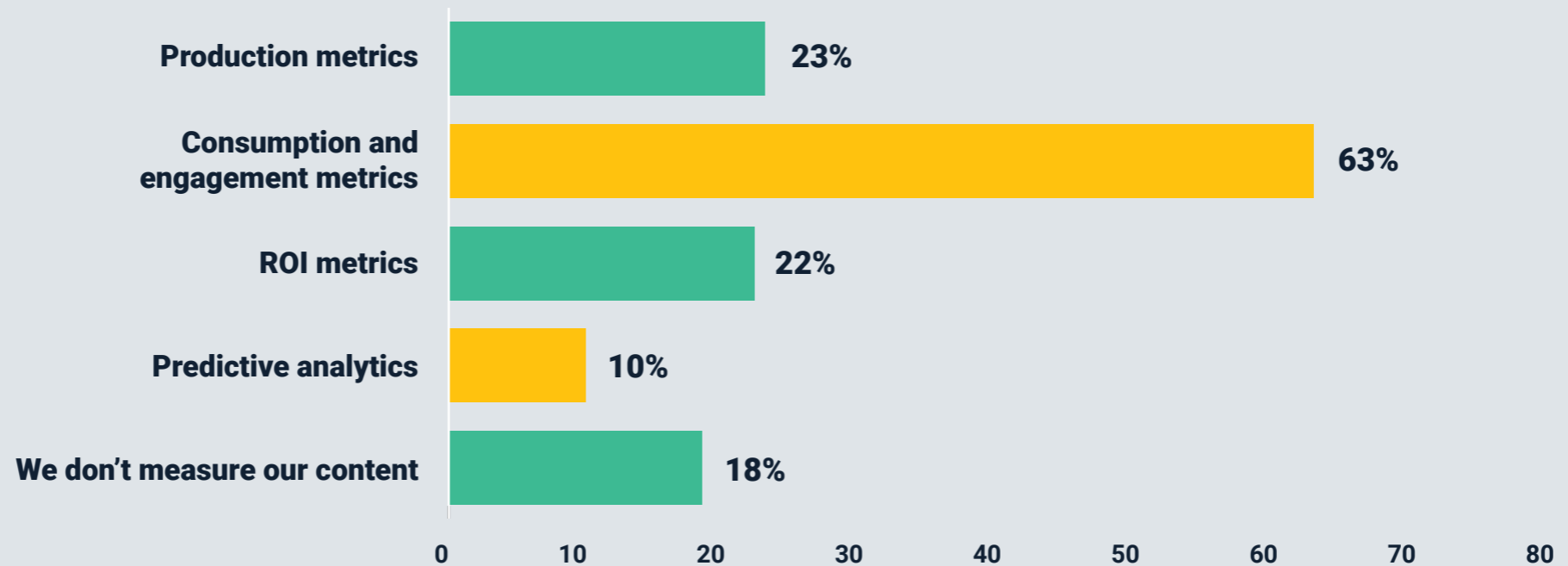
Technologies used to help with content creation



Metrics are another way that companies are trying to ensure the success of their content. The most common data they track (cited by 63 percent of respondents) are consumption and engagement metrics such as page views, time on page, downloads, and sign-ups. This was followed by production metrics (what content was created, how long it took, what it cost) and ROI metrics (the impact each piece of content has on sales and revenue).

Meanwhile, predictive metrics came in at a distant fourth place, cited by just 10 percent of respondents. Although predictive metrics are currently less popular, we believe they'll become essential for helping content professionals optimize their content and "predict" how well it will perform – before it ever gets published. That's because such metrics can be used to evaluate factors like content quality, tone of voice, and consistency, all of which content professionals say are very important.

Types of metrics and analytics used to measure content



Other important factors for success are having documented processes and following them carefully. This was cited as being particularly important for increasing overall efficiency with regard to content creation. So, too, is working for an organization where content is a priority for everyone. Respondents felt that both of these factors were more important than having adequate staffing or even adequate budget. And, as we've seen, having a documented content strategy is key for giving content professionals the direction they need to create effective content.

Most important factors for efficient content creation



69%
Documented processes that are closely followed



59%
Use the right technology



57%
Content is high priority for the company so everyone pays attention to it



41%
Adequate staffing



16%
Adequate budget



HOW CAN YOU APPLY THESE FINDINGS TO YOUR BUSINESS?

- ❑ Focus on creating higher-quality content that's well-written and provides your target audience with useful information. Keep in mind that the best content is usually consistent, concise, reflective of your brand, and adopts an engaging tone of voice.
- ❑ Look for ways to make content creation a more streamlined and efficient process. Breaking down silos, using the right tools and technologies, and adhering to well-defined processes will help.
- ❑ Get comfortable with the idea of measuring your content against some predetermined benchmarks prior to publishing it. This will give you confidence that your message will make the right impact and deliver the results you expect.
- ❑ As more people get involved in content creation at your company (third parties, other staff members, non-native speakers, etc.), give them a framework (preferably technology-driven) that governs their content creation. This will ensure they're able to adhere to the standards and goals your organization values.



THE WAY FORWARD

In 2018, content professionals are going to be hard pressed to create not only enough content, but also content that's able to cut through and hold their audience's attention.

While many factors will determine the success or failure of a piece of content, this survey makes clear that quality is one of the most important. How well the content is written and the utility of the information it conveys both determine its quality.

We believe that the most successful content creators will be the ones that focus on improving the quality of their content by making sure that it's clear, well written, engaging, and enjoyable to read. Smart companies will support their content creation efforts with straightforward, documented processes, and the use of the right tools and technologies, to create the necessary efficiencies to operate successfully at scale.

Going forward, those companies that can pull this off will be the ones that separate themselves from their competitors and derive the greatest value from their content creation efforts.





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