



What makes you MAD about content?

A thought-provoking report about
content preferences and trends in 2021



An introductory note

I recently ran a survey entitled ‘What makes you MAD about content?’. One of the most interesting things I drew from the results was an apparent conflict that people demonstrated between wanting content that’s in-depth, valuable and educational, and wanting content that’s short and easy to scan via well-structured sections and flag posting.

On further reflection, however, this apparent contradiction isn’t so much of a contradiction after all. People want to be able to scan content quickly and easily, find the section they’re looking for or that’s most relevant to them, and then digest that section in full. It makes perfect sense!

So, in the spirit of in-depth content that’s also easy to scan, here’s a quick overview of what this report will cover.

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Background

Here's a quick bit of background to the report:

Survey title: What makes you MAD about content?

Timing: April 2021

Number of respondents: 993

Profile of respondents: A mixture of general business and marketing professionals from across the globe.

The initial purpose of the survey was three-fold:

- 01** To investigate if what we like as **consumers of content** matches with what we put out as **creators of content**.
- 02** To understand some of the behaviours involved in **how people consume content** - do we read articles in full, do we remember what we've read or seen, do we always engage with content we like?
- 03** To demonstrate the **range of preferences involved in the consumption - and creation - of content** and to identify if any patterns actually exist across this range or if, as complex and varied human beings, we are indeed 'all different'.



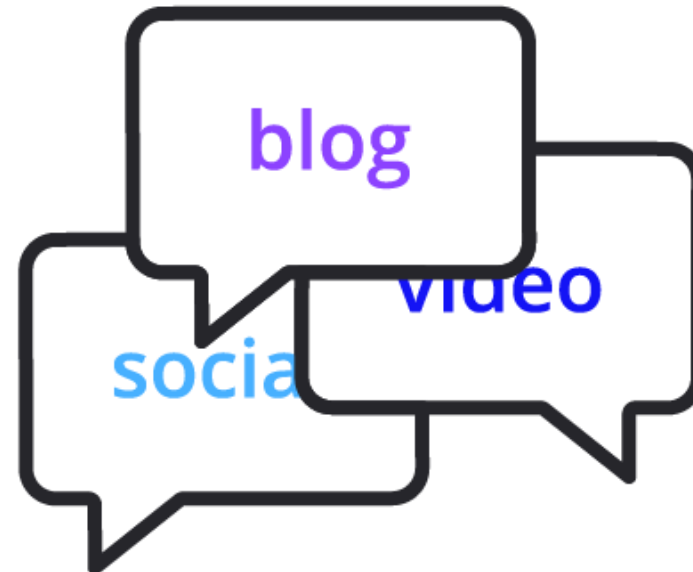


Survey Results

The survey itself was split into **two main sections**:

- 01** Questions pertaining to how people behave as **'consumers of content'**, for example, how they engage with social posts when they're loafing on the sofa on a Thursday evening.
- 02** Questions relating to how people, and the companies they work for, **create content**, whether that's in a direct marketing role or as an observer of how the marketing team function day-to-day.

The results are structured into two sections as above and they throw up some interesting insights and points of view!





Consumers of content

It's psychologically fascinating to examine how exactly we consume and engage with content. For years now, techniques such as eye-tracking and even brain wave monitoring have been deployed to understand what exactly is going on in our brains when we like a social post or see an online advert. Nevertheless, these techniques have never really become mainstream in marketing, in part because the act of consuming content isn't ordinarily confined to a lab - more often, we're engaging with content when we're multitasking, scrolling inanely whilst watching the TV or checking updates just as the boss pings us on Slack!

That's not to say though that content is purely passive. There's many a time we'll become immersed in reading a great blog article or sucked into watching a funny video. And on a subconscious, neuroscientific level, there's sometimes little to distinguish between an advert we saw for a few seconds and an article we've taken the time to read more thoroughly - memory is a funny old thing after all, as we delve into a bit later on.

All that aside, it's still interesting to see how we *'think'* we behave with content, which is exactly what the first part of the survey explored.



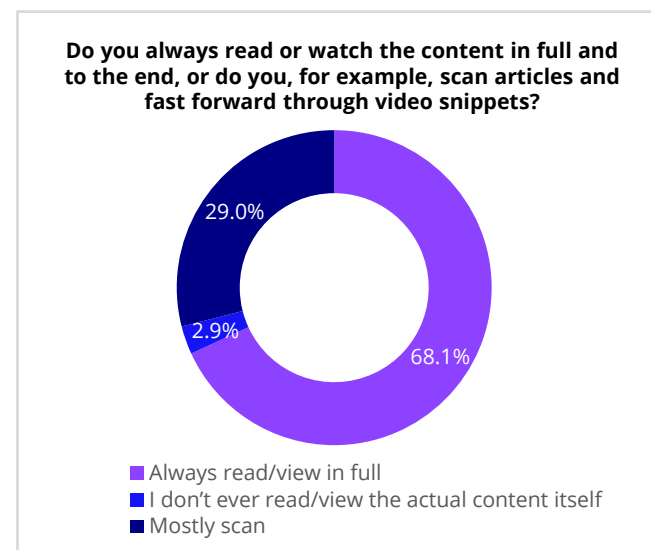
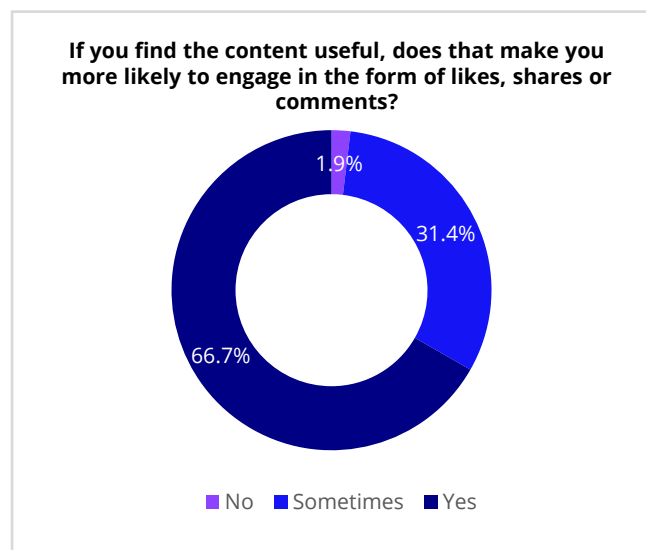
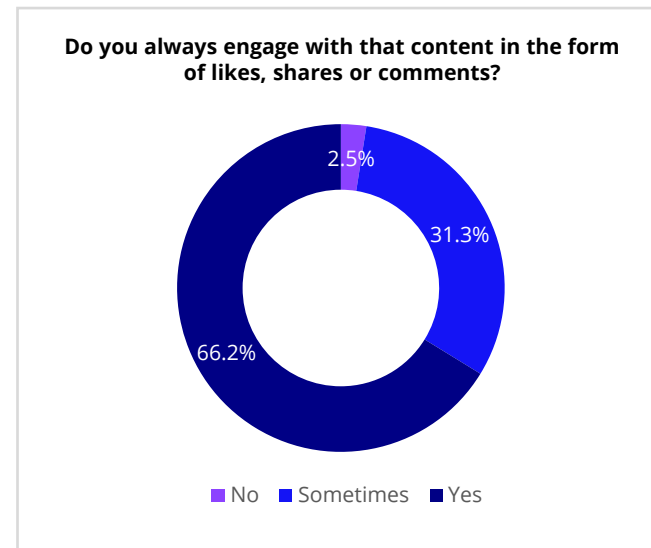
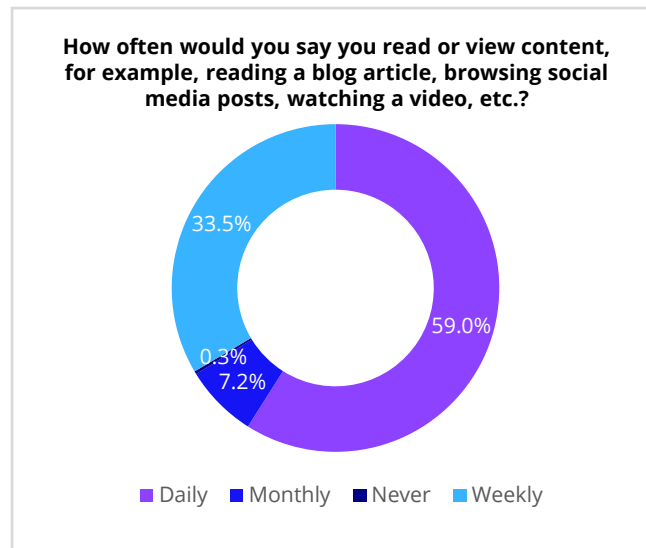


How do we behave and engage with content?

We asked people the following questions:

- **How often would you say you read or view content, for example, reading a blog article, browsing social media posts, watching a video, etc.?**
- **Do you always engage with that content in the form of likes, shares or comments?**
- **If you find the content useful, does that make you more likely to engage in the form of likes, shares or comments?**
- **Do you always read or watch the content in full and to the end, or do you, for example, scan articles and fast forward through video snippets?**

The results are shown on the right.





Unsurprisingly, **the majority of people (59%) said they consumed content on a daily basis**, with a large percentage (33.5%) then saying weekly. Given the plethora of devices we use in our day-to-day lives nowadays, it comes as no surprise that we're consuming content so frequently - it's so easy to pick up that smartphone and scroll through Instagram or LinkedIn.

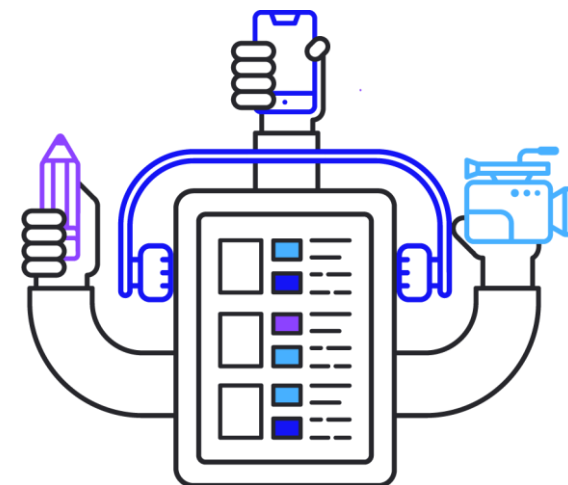
Where the results do get interesting though is with engagement - although a majority (66.2%) claim they always engage with the content they see, a not insignificant amount (31.3%) do not engage. Now that doesn't automatically mean they haven't subconsciously registered seeing it and it doesn't preclude that they didn't like the content either - it simply points to the fact that we all consume and engage differently.

It's an idea that's reinforced with the next chart from the previous page - that 66.7% of people are more likely to engage if they find the content useful. Yes, that's still a majority, but the 'Sometimes' and 'No's' shouldn't be entirely disregarded.

Where this section of the survey did point out something surprising was in the final chart - 68.1% of people say they read or view content in full. So all these media headlines about our attention spans decreasing and our 'need for speed' increasing... well perhaps it's not so clear cut after all.

"There's no question that content creation and consumption are on the rise. Particularly over the last year, we're seeing more and more marketers placing a greater emphasis on producing content to drive awareness and build demand for their businesses. This goes hand-in-hand with a growing trend where buyers are spending more time educating themselves on products and solutions through content consumption, which ultimately drives up the need for marketers to produce more content to enable that."

Karla Rivershaw, Head of Marketing, Turtl

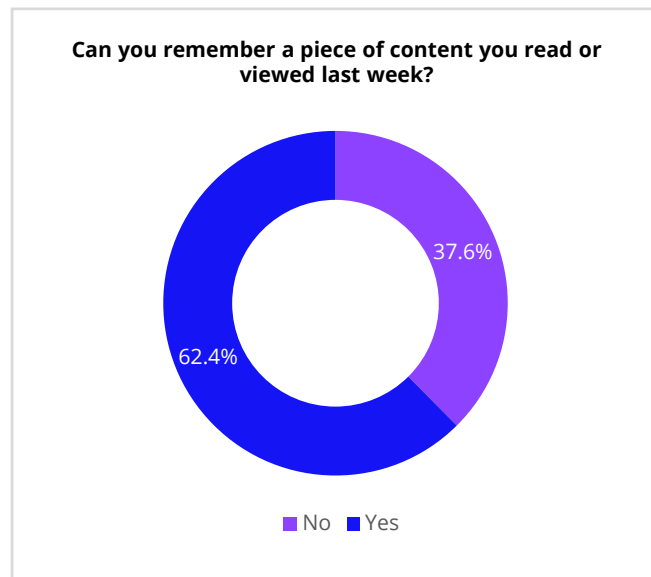




Do we actually remember content?

Personally, this is a topic that fascinates me - just how much of what we see do we actually remember?

The survey results did not disappoint.



When asked to pinpoint what brand or company that content was from though, the results got even more interesting. A lot of people cited big brands such as Amazon, Apple, Facebook and Google. Then there were other lesser known brands such as Trinny London on the consumer side, and GoCardless on the business side. And finally, there were a number of people stating things like 'some marketing consultant', 'a software company', 'a body coach' or 'a cosmetics brand'.

Now, I don't know about you, but this piques my interest.

Do people really remember the big brands or is that just tainted memory recall because these brands are so omnipresent anyway?

Are the more vague responses more accurate in terms of what we do actually remember?

We'll explore this a bit more in the [Insights](#) section on Page 15.



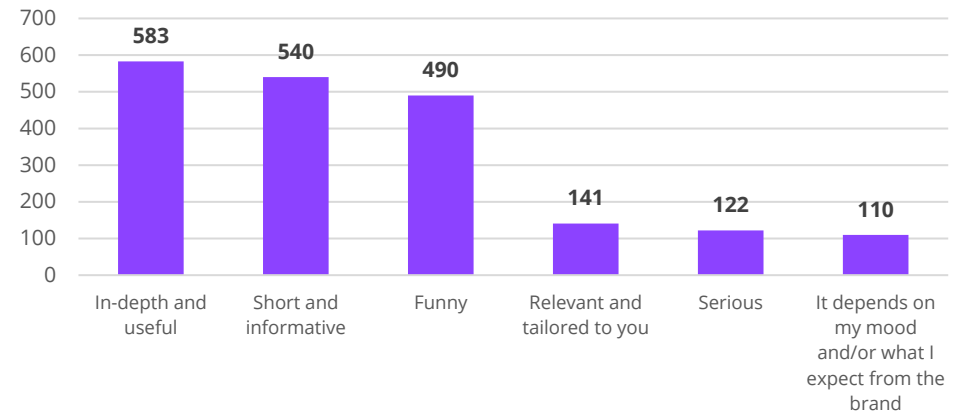
What content do we like?

Going a level deeper, we then asked what content people actually like - both in terms of style and format. Here's a quick glance at the results.

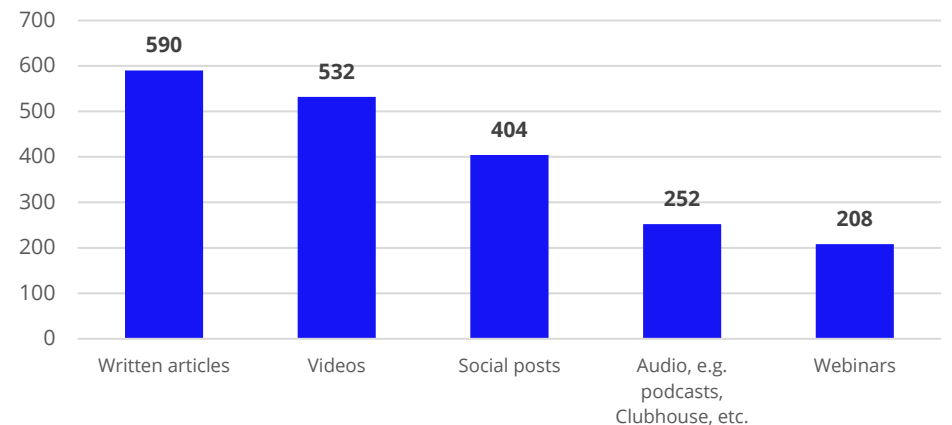
“Well-written articles are easy to scan to see if you want to commit to reading in full. The same goes for short-form videos. These forms of content give people a detailed insight into your brand values and what you represent without the need to ‘contact sales’ or commit to buying. The buyer of the 2020’s wants to know the brand they are buying from, whether that’s b2b or b2c or d2c. Good content builds that consistency.”

Lavaniya Das, Marketing Partner & High-Growth Stage Advisor at bp Launchpad

What style of content do you prefer (select your top two)?



What format do you prefer (select your top two)?





When then asked to expand on what it is that we like the most about content we find useful, the responses were varied, but concentrated on a few common threads:

- Educational and insightful - content that actually teaches something / solves a challenge / helps me day-to-day
- Content that's easy to digest / scan / find what I'm looking for
- Not salesy
- Not fluffy or 'clickbait'
- Content where the headline matches the actual content
- Original research and ideas, a different perspective with expert opinion and practical advice



And when it comes to content we dislike, the responses pretty much matched the opposite of what we do like!

- Fluffy, salesy content
- Clickbait
- Propaganda
- Misleading headlines - bait and switch content or content where you have to dig for actual substance
- Content with no research behind it
- Poorly structured, not easily laid out, content with typos that's not been proofread
- Repetitive content that's boring or shows a lack of creativity and originality

"I can't stand content that promises much and delivers little. Typically this involves a 'bait and switch' with a strong headline or subject line followed by content that doesn't do what it says on the tin. The other thing that gets me mad is content that promises to teach you something but is actually just selling. Oh, and gated content not worth gating..."

**Gifford Morley-Fletcher, Global Account Director,
MarketOne International**





Creators of content

So here's the big question... as 'creators of content', do we stick to what we like as 'consumers'? Do we create content that's true to our likes and dislikes?

Well, the good news seems to be - YES!

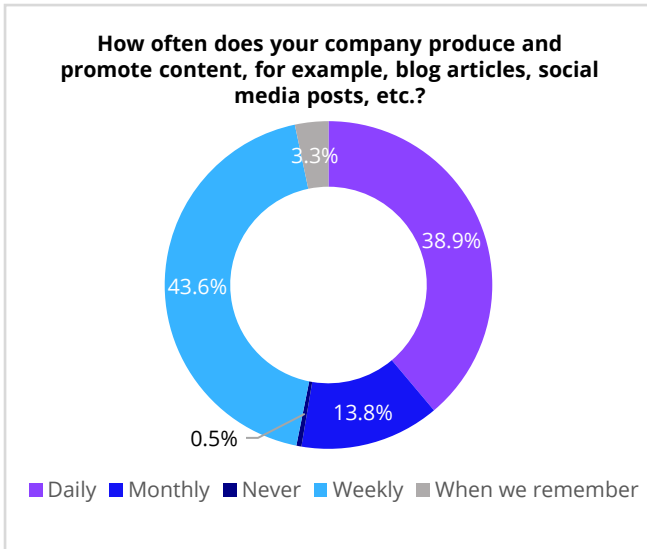
"I'm doing more and more video content, because our people are such an important part of our brand. There's no better way to emphasise that element than by getting our team's faces in front of people, talking about what we're great at."

Joe Jones, Content Marketing Manager, Allica Bank

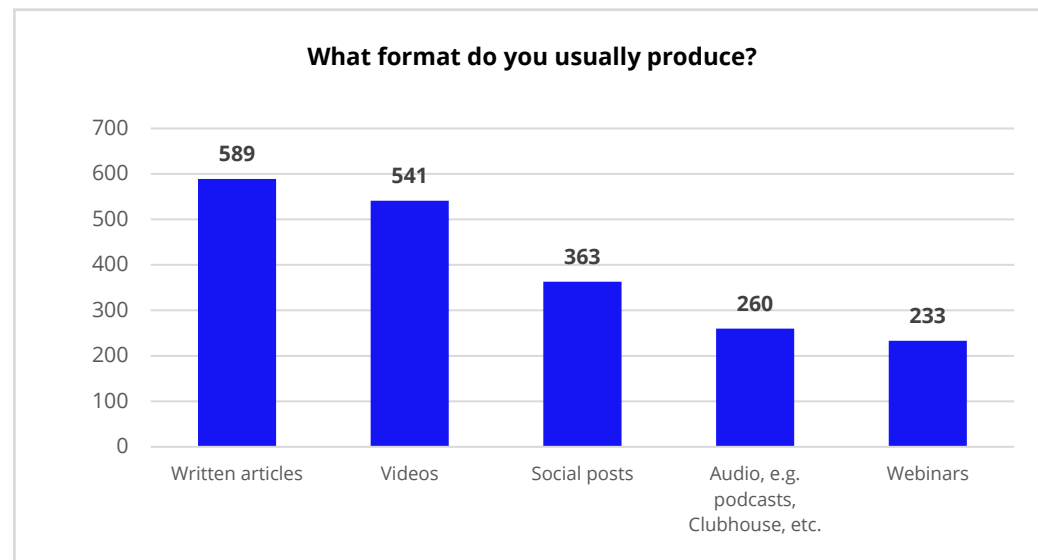
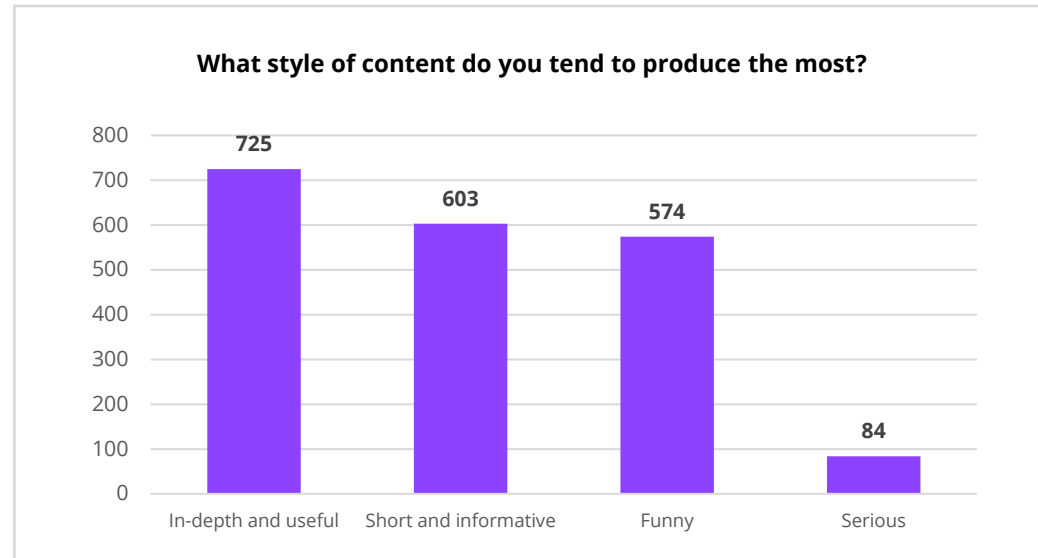




What content do we create?



We more or less create content in line with how often we consume it, as can be seen from chart 1 above. And we tend to stick to the style and formats we also prefer - namely content that's either in-depth and useful, or short and informative, and content that's in the form of written articles and videos (charts 2 and 3 to the right).





What content do we like?

Similarly, when asked to elaborate on the content we like creating or seeing the most at our companies, the words and phrases used echoed those from the previous section, albeit with some notable additions.

- Expertise and thought leadership content
- In-depth guides and instructional how-to content
- Webinars - they're very repurposable
- Culture stuff - the behind-the-scenes company content
- Customer stories and interviews - they work well with our audience
- Blogging and embedded videos - animated content is great fun to create!



"Webinars in particular are powerful - they do 100 things at once! They're repurposable, good for relationship building, great as recordings... the list goes on."

Christina Pashialis, Founder, ContentUK

"I like having a bank of written content that helps prospects build confidence in our work. Events and webinars have also been super great at brand awareness and as a way to meet our audience."

Tristan Gillen, Founder, Growth Division





And when it comes to the content we dislike seeing, well I'm sure you can guess!

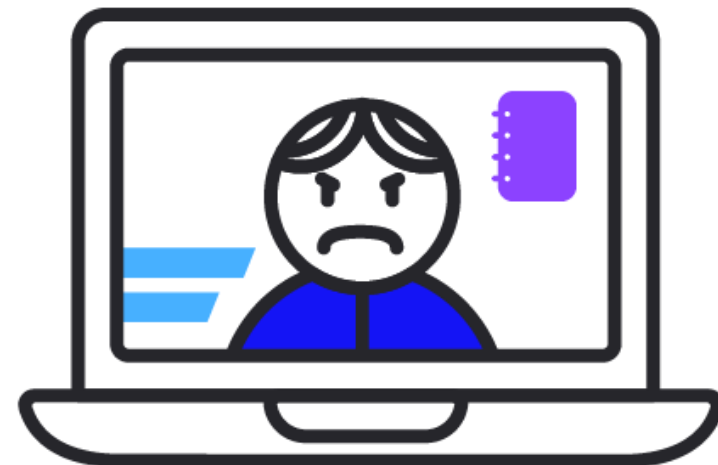
- 'Me too' / copycat / vanilla content
- Overly long, technical content
- Misleading headlines
- Salesy rather than educational
- Articles only written for SEO
- 'Life hacks' that really aren't!

So what's your take on these results so far? Have you noticed anything surprising or unexpected? Or are the stats and responses pretty much what you'd have guessed at?

In our next section, we'll take the results a step further and analyse what they might just mean!

"I dislike some of the social media content we're putting out there - sometimes it feels like we're creating it just to 'be active.'"

Anonymous, Co-Founder, SaaS startup





Insights

Insight 1 - The one about frequency

Did you know that one of the top 'how often' searches on Google is 'how often should you post on social media'?

It's obviously a quandary that's keeping many of us up at night. It's also one that often elicits the response of **'how long is a piece of string?'**.

But the good news is that we can all take heart from the results of this survey. As 'consumers of content', we're viewing or reading content on a daily or weekly basis; as 'creators of content', we're producing content with similar frequency. However, don't be tempted to take this as a sign that you need to be creating more just to keep up or stand out from the crowd - more doesn't always mean better! Moreover, quite a few of the comments in the survey complained about when content is created 'just for the sake of it' - that kind of 'me too' content just to be seen on a specific channel. Go that route and you'll only end up frustrating your customers and wider audience - stick to the general rule of creating and posting valuable content only and you'll not go wrong. Focus on quality and elements such as interactivity, and you'll be sure to stand out against those just doing it for quantity's sake.

By the way, for those interested in more of a concrete steer on exactly how many social posts you might want to be doing for the different social channels, you should check out Buffer's guide [here](#).

"In terms of how often we should be creating and posting content, the simplest answer is 'as often as possible'. But of course it's not that straightforward. You need to find a balance of quantity vs quality, and also think about original content vs repurposed or curated content. As with so much in marketing, it comes down to experimenting and finding out what works for you and your audience."

Rin Hamburgh, Founder & Creative Director, Rin Hamburgh & Co



Insight 2 - The one about styles and formats

As with frequency, we can take comfort in the survey results that the styles and formats we prefer to consume are also, by and large, those that we're creating.

But let's take a deeper dive into the styles and formats that came out on top.

For style, the top two types we prefer to both consume and create are:

- In-depth and useful
- Short and informative

Now, at first glance, these might seem to conflict. But if we go back to one of the original aims of this survey, it was 'to demonstrate the range of preferences involved in the consumption - and creation - of content and to identify if any patterns actually exist across this range or if, as complex and varied human beings, we are indeed 'all different'. As with many things, the truth lies somewhere in the middle - yes, there are a range of preferences, some people like in-depth, others like shorter-form content. But overall, we do tend to fall into one of these two buckets.

The same goes for format, where the top two came out on both the consumption and creation sides as:

- Written articles
- Videos

So again, demonstrating that we have different preferences but, overall, tend to gravitate towards either articles or videos, perhaps even both depending on the substance of the content itself and our mood at any one time!

I suppose what we're getting at here is that big bold statements like 'blogs are dead, everyone wants video now' or 'people want short content, they haven't got the time or attention spans to digest longer articles' only belong in one place - the bin! And the next time the boss makes one of these grandiose, sweeping statements, we know how to reason them back to a more balanced approach.



Insight 3 - The one about...erm, what was it?

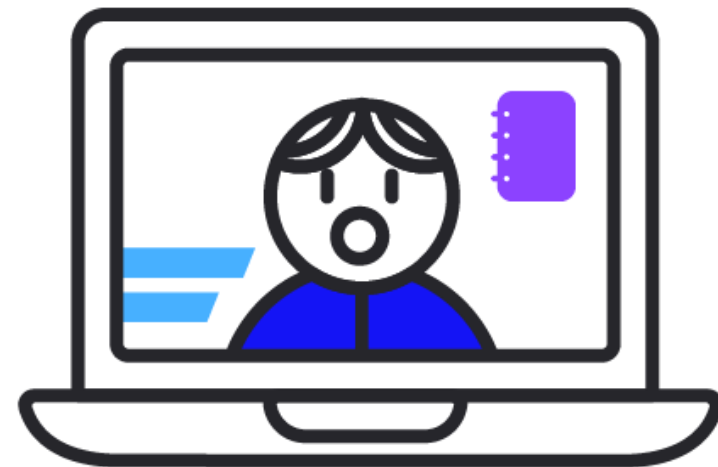
Forgive my bad attempt at subtle humour there! I think you can guess what this one's about - yes, memory.

Having studied neuroscience, this is one that always pricks my ears up. I've also worked for enough big brands to understand just how challenging it is to nail down concrete results from advertising recall studies. And I've sat through a fair few focus groups over the years hearing first hand how people mis-remember details from what you thought was the most memorable ever marketing campaign.

And this survey - albeit only scratching the surface on this particular topic - only served to reinforce those long-held frustrations.

The fact of the matter is that our memories aren't reliable. And this isn't through any malice act of misinformation or fake news - it's simply because we construct memories based on our own, very personal experiences, and then recreate those memories in the context of many other memories we've stored too.

There are copious studies looking into this phenomenon - a quick search on Google will yield many a scholarly article proving just how unreliable our memories are. For anyone interested in more of an entertaining angle on the topic, I'd highly recommend any of the illustrious books by Oliver Sacks. Or, for a very different take on it, watch the Netflix series 'Making a Murderer' - it's actually a fascinating study into memory and the manipulation of memory too.





Insight 3 - The one about...erm, what was it?

But how does all this help us as content consumers and content creators?

Well, the first thing may be somewhat unpopular... and that's to try and step back a bit from our inclination in marketing right now to 'over analyse'. Yes, I get it, we've got an abundance of data now and analytics coming out of our ears - all showing how our customers are engaging with our content and what that *might* mean for our marketing and sales KPI. But here's the clincher - we have VERY LITTLE control over what our customers will remember, or how they'll remember it either. We put out a bit of content in a blue brand colour, they might remember it as purple. We quote a survey stat of 66%, they might remember this as 76%. The point is not to overthink or over analyse our content. (Cue a barrage of questions and arguments about attribution! 😊).

That said, there are certainly some tactics we can deploy to make our content more memorable. These include leveraging novelty, using stories, creating mnemonics and focusing on the specifics. For more on this bewitching world of memorable content, I'd highly recommend checking out [Memzy](#) and reading some of [Carmen Simon](#)'s articles and posts on LinkedIn.

"The next very real challenge that we're already witnessing is that with so much content out there, it can be really difficult for the buyer to know what to pay attention to. Equally, it's becoming more challenging for marketers to produce content that stands out. I believe this competition for attention is our next big challenge in marketing and ultimately this will lead to us seeing a decrease in the amount of content being produced, with a greater focus on quality and interactivity to provide buyers with the best possible brand experience."

Karla Rivershaw, Head of Marketing, Turtl



Insight 4 - The one about bloody clickbait

Yes folks, it came up time and again in the survey results - people don't like clickbait!

"I can't stand it when content turns into a sales pitch or is a clickbait headline that has no substance in the content."

Sophy Gray, Founder, The Marketing Bee

**So the question is, who the heck is creating it out there?
And why do we feel some strange impulse to do it?**

On the one hand, we can reason that we probably know who's creating the clickbait - advertisers only interested in one thing, newspaper journalists under huge amounts of pressure, even malicious governments trying to rig elections (if you believe that sort of thing). But the question still comes back to the point that someone, a human, is creating this stuff, and they probably don't even like it themselves.

Not just that, but we still click on it too. I bet you've clicked on clickbait at least once in the past week. You may detest it with every fibre of your body, but there's still that flicker of curiosity that impels you to click on it, the itch you still need to scratch.

I'm not going to purport to know the answer or solution to all of this. Whether it's the dopamine hit you get from clicking on it to then find out it's exactly the sort of rubbish you were expecting, or the adrenaline hit you get from finding out a piece of news that no one else knows about, there's some libidinal instinct at work here that we'll do well to unpick and understand in the next century.



One thing we can do in the meantime though is to do our best not to add to this murky world. And here are two very simple steps I think we can all try and take in this quest:

Ditch the misleading headline - don't create content with a completely unrelated headline just to get people to click on it. Honestly, what's the point?

Minimise ads and popups. They're distracting and annoying. And sorry [Neil Patel](#), but you're one of the worst offenders!

"Ads and popups are a great tool, if they aren't overdone! We have enough to contend with in terms of data and privacy notifications so additional popups should be treated with care and only used when they don't harm the user experience."

Roger Wilks, CMO, Quantum Marketing

As **George Rowlands, Content Lead at NetHunt CRM** [says](#),

"I think clickbait has all but died a death. I still see it knocking around here and there, but brands doing it just need to stop. We need to clean up the internet, it's become pretty unbearable with pop-ups, paywalls, and those little cookie warnings that we need to agree to. Saying goodbye to clickbait is a step in the right direction towards better brand-consumer trust and online experience."





MAD about content

So what can we take from this survey?

Can we even believe the results given what we've learned about the unreliability of memory?

And how on earth can we create a world of content that doesn't fall back on cheap clickbait?

Well, I'm certainly not arrogant enough to believe that a survey such as this would make any waves in the wider marketing industry. Or that it would reveal insights that many of us haven't already considered as we're either on the receiving or producing ends of the content itself.

However, what I may propose - if it's only a very small drop in the ocean - is some form of **content code** regarding what we actually like about content and what gets us MAD about it.

And it's really very simple indeed!

Let's **keep creating content that we ourselves** like and find valuable. The stuff that's educational, practical and actionable. That contains original research and ideas, with expert opinion and new, creative ways of thinking. Oh, and that's also easy to scan through good layout, structure and sections.

And **let's stop creating content** that's fluffy or salesy and that adds no value whatsoever. Or that's just an attempt to copy the competition or rank for a particular keyword, and that, dare I say it, verges on clickbait!

What do you think? It shouldn't be that hard a challenge. 😊

If you're in the 60% that like written articles, why not check out the [immerj blog](#) for more musings and insights.

And if you need help with your content - anything from developing the upfront strategy to making your copy more memorable, [just get in touch](#).

