Shallow Review of Content Marketing

The basic premise behind content marketing is creating interesting content (such as blogs, videos or infographics) that people want to spend time on. The second step is to build an audience and make occasional fundraising requests. An example of Content Marketing would be connecting a yearly Peer to Peer (P2P) event to a large audience of a popular and related blog.

There are two main ways to go about content marketing. The first is to create one’s own content and thus build your own audience. The second is to tap into existing audiences that might be interested via guest posting.

Research

Most charities do some content marketing -60-92% depending on how it’s defined -by running a blog or creating outreach-focused videos. (The same study that demonstrates this also measures 11 different content marketing tactics.) That being said, it seems that only a minority of charities gain their donors via content marketing. Some charities, such as...
“Invisible Children”, use content to gain the majority of their donor base, but often making your own content involves large costs for small returns. Often content marketing seems to meet only minimal standards rather than be a primary driver of growth (similar to social media).

Some evidence in favor of content marketing is that many effective meta charities have gained followers and supporters via blogs and written content. This content generally has the smallest broad appeal, but costs much less time to create than a video or infographic. There might be more appeal in a charity reviewer making content than a direct charity as it might come across as less sales-driven and more useful. Content marketing has also been used by the rationality and skeptic movements as a way of acquiring new supporters. Content marketing has also often been used by international charities as a tool to create more sympathy for a cause but it was impossible to find concrete numbers on the success rate.

Some fundraising experts we interviewed seemed to think that most content was a waste of time for nonprofits with the exception of keeping their websites seeming “fresh”. Others thought creating content for other websites (e.g. guest blog posts) could be a very good use of time if the website had a promising demographic.

We have done some minor experiments with content marketing and have noticed some additional website traffic, but have only seen very small donor conversion rates. Most of the information online for content marketing outlined how to do it and was not comparative. Copyblogger was the most helpful resource for how to do content marketing, although it was not helpful in comparing it to other areas.

**Minimum Cost Experiments**

One way to run a minimum cost experiment would be to pay someone to make content related to our goals, such as infographics that we can promote and track traffic and donations with. The problem with testing this out is the results will vary massively depending on the target market and the type of content. Infographics might cost between $10 and $50 each and you would want a larger sample size (something in the range of 10) to get a good sense of the traffic generated. I would estimate the experiment would take about $1000 and one month of one full time staff member’s time. The results are difficult to predict. I think there would be an increase in web traffic and donations, but I would be surprised if there were more than $1000 worth of donations without first building up a large audience. If this experiment was
successful, I would expect website numbers to improve right away and donation numbers to improve at the next P2P event.

The experiment could also be run with videos or blog posts, but both would likely take more staff time and videos would cost considerably more.

Another way to run an experiment would be to write guest posts (I know Charity Science already has a guest posting spot on the Atheist Republic) and carefully track how much traffic and how many donors this brings in. As with infographics, you would want to do around 10 posts, but the time and money cost would likely be about half. Compared to infographics, this experiment seems more likely to be successful.

**Estimated Potential**

I would guess the money moved in the first month would range between 0 and 500 dollars moved to effective charities, with the long term totals ranging from 0 to 5000 dollars. I would expect that content marketing might cost more then 1:1, but it may help with donor acquisition that could later be used to achieve far better then 1:1 returns (e.g., P2P, legacies etc). The guest posts I expect to do slightly better with a bit less time.

I would expect running a small experiment as a small charity would not be far worse than doing so as a larger charity. Its fairly easy to pay for your content to reach new people over social media, and in theory people would want to share it.

Part of the appeal of content marketing is the very small chance at very high returns (e.g. viral content). I think the odds of this are so small that even included, they do not affect the total much.

**Further Research**

There are many remaining questions, but I am not confident that further research would lead to more understanding of how content marketing is comparatively. Talking to fundraising experts who do content marketing seems the most likely to yield this information, but I still only put a 20% chance on it clarifying how to rank content marketing. This experiment might very well be quicker than doing more research.

**Subjective Sense**

The main cost of this experiment would be time. Having useful content might have other benefits (such as being able to use it for workplace giving or to give to top charities). This
The approach overall seems somewhat promising. It’s a bit of a long shot, but has possible good returns and is easier to test than some of the other options.

References

4. https://docs.google.com/document/d/1F8SpayNTFgn9xBtnYR9QIn0-Ns3vLEY91RiqhjQVAM/edit