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SECRETS FOR **MORE POWERFUL** CONTENT IDEAS

If it seems like every content idea under the sun has been done, that's because it's true.

So what makes a piece of content stand out?

It's all in the packaging—journalism-speak for how a story is presented, from the organization to the layout.

Whether you're generating content ideas for your branded magazine, your company blog, a lead-gen report, or a whitepaper, these packaging tips—gleaned from 20+ years of journalism experience—will help you turn “ho hum” into “gotta read this!”

1

Quiz Your Audience

I once wrote an article for *Family Circle* magazine that was essentially advice on how to enjoy your Thanksgiving meal without piling on pounds—a typical diet article. Except that it wasn't. What made this idea stand out is that I packaged it as a multiple-choice quiz.

The trick is to make sure your answers are not too easy to guess. For example, the *Family Circle* article included this:

One of these popular side dishes has about 75 percent more calories than the others. Which is it?

- A Sweet potato casserole made with marshmallows, cream, and brown sugar
- B Mashed potatoes made with milk, cream, and butter
- C Green bean casserole made with cream of mushroom soup and French fried onions

Answer: **B**, mashed potatoes

You'd think something with "sweet" in the name—and marshmallows in the recipe—would be the winner in waist-expanding powers. But in reality, this tasty dish is the best choice of these three beloved sides. One serving of mashed potatoes has about 315 calories, as opposed to 182 for the green bean casserole and 175 for the sweet potato casserole (yes, even the healthy-sounding green bean casserole has more calories than the sweet potato casserole!).

Quizzes educate and entertain at the same time—a refreshing change from the usual pedantic "how-to" content.

2

Chunk It Down

A "chunky" format, with boxes and graphics, lets readers jump through your content and take in valuable information with every glance.

Say you're developing a whitepaper on how credit unions can solve common security issues. Try arranging the information into different boxes for cyber security, physical security, and the rest.

Add in some pull quotes, infographics, and sidebars with resources or little-known stats, and you've turned a tedious whitepaper into an easy read.

3

Get Graphic

No, not *that* kind of graphic.

What we mean is: how could you present your content as a visually appealing graphic instead of straight text?

Here are three ways:

- **Structure your content as a chart** (aka a "charticle"). For instance, if you're running an article on your blog about how to break bad news—your pet hamster died, your breath stinks, I saw your husband with another woman—put one piece of bad news in each row and then create columns with headers like "Should you tell?" "What to say," "What not to say," and "Expert tip." This makes a been-there-done-that idea new and unique. You might also format a charticle a sharable infographic.
- **Develop a graphic** with call-outs pointing to various parts of the image. For a downloadable report on saving energy, for example, develop a graphic of a house with calls-outs pointing to the different areas where utility customers can save money on heat or AC, like the door, the windows, the chimney, the furnace, and the vents.
- **Design a timeline** to tell your business's story from its founding until now, show a few years' worth of client wins in a case study—in short, to depict anything you'd normally write up as a staid sequence of events.

These are only three examples; keep your eyes open as you read content in print or online for more inspiration.

4

Surprise Your Audience

Here's a time-tested tip for turning a snooze-worthy idea into one that will make readers sit up and take notice: when you're brainstorming content ideas, add the word "surprising" to your proposed title. Like so:

How the SmartSign Helped Gary's Grocery Sell More Produce



The Surprising Way the SmartSign Helped Gary's Grocery Sell More Produce

Retain Your Best Technicians



5 Surprising Ways to Retain Your Best Technicians

Why Your Home Isn't Selling



The Surprising Reasons Your Home Isn't Selling

10 Things Your Lawyer Wishes You Knew



10 Surprising Things Your Lawyer Wishes You Knew

Notice how this takes a content topic from general to finely tuned. You're no longer replaying an old idea—you're offering a different take on it.

Now, this doesn't mean that you have to actually add "surprising" to the title...the word now reeks of clickbait. But including it during the idea-honing phase helps you keep in mind that even if your main idea is evergreen, your audience wants content that is unique and special—something they haven't seen a hundred times before.

Once you decide to make your content surprising, the big task is to *actually offer unique information*. Ask your SMEs or stakeholders:

- What piece of technician retention advice would surprise readers the most?
- What's the most surprising way the SmartSign has helped you sell more produce?
- What are some reasons a home may not be selling that readers may not have thought of?

Now you're providing real value in a way that's easy to take in and remember.

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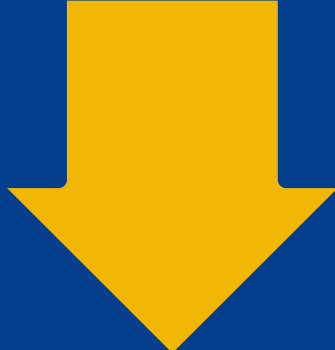
Break It Up

When content is packed into one long, unwieldy block, readers head off in search of content that's easier on the eyes (and the brain).

Well-tuned *subheds*—that's journalism jargon for *subheads*—make content more visually appealing, allow your audience to scan the content to grasp the basics, and help organize the information into easy-to-digest chunks.

But not just any subheds will do. Make sure yours are short, snappy, and consistent. For example, they may all be three-word commands; a hospital's downloadable report on healthy living tips for Boomers might include subheds like "Pop a C," "Log Your Zs," "Shun the Sun," and so on.

(Is this content destined to appear online? Pack your subheds with SEO keywords, if you can do it without sacrificing readability, since keywords in heading tags improve your search engine results.)



Need help with your content?

While I'm retired myself (after 25 years!), I have a small network of hand-picked writers I refer businesses to. Email me at lindaformichelli@gmail.com with details on your project (type, topics, timeline, budget) and I'll try to set up intros with some great writers that fit your needs.

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