

**BEYOND THE BUZZWORD:  
BRAND JOURNALISM AND THE  
FUTURE OF CONTENT MARKETING**



# BRAND JOURNALISM IS MORE THAN A BUZZWORD

## To save you time ...

You can just read this callout instead of the whole paper.

## *Here's the main point:*

Emotional connections to your brand increase demand. You can create these connections with great content.

It's safe to say this about HR technology marketing: We have led the way in content marketing. These days, you don't have to look too far to find an article trying to sell marketers on the benefits of content. And while many B2C brands are still pondering whether they should go boldly into 2007, we know that we've been using content to grow companies at 30 to 100 percent CAGR. That's the good news.

Now for the bad news: Most HR technology companies could learn a thing or two from the B2C world on using brand better. That doesn't mean that B2B trails B2C in use of brand. In fact, recent research from the Corporate Executive Board shows leading enterprise software brands such as Oracle, SAP, and Cisco lead B2C tech stalwarts such as Apple and Amazon.com.<sup>1</sup> But there's a lot of room for improvement in the use of brand in HR technology.

So is brand journalism the silver bullet for brand development? This buzz phrase is popping up all over the place these days. But is it just a fad that really is the same thing as content marketing? Or is it something truly different and worth your time? The short answer is that using content to generate demand and build brand deserves your full attention. In this paper, we'll discuss the place of brand in B2B marketing, explain how brand **and** demand are joined at the hip, and show you how to focus your time, effort, and budget to create content that builds brand and generates demand.

<sup>1</sup> This is a great report. A real must read. Go read it now at <http://www.executiveboard.com/exbd-resources/content/b2b-emotion/pdf/promotion-emotion-whitepaper-full.pdf> or just view the report at <http://www.executiveboard.com/exbd-resources/content/b2b-emotion/pdf/promotion-emotion-presentation-full.pdf>



# WHAT IS BRAND JOURNALISM?

If we're going to discuss what brand journalism is and how it differs from content marketing, the best place to start is with David Meerman Scott, the foremost authority on content marketing. If you're in marketing and haven't read his book *The New Rules of Marketing and PR*, you should move it to the top of your airplane reads. You'll highlight something on every page.

So how does Scott define brand journalism?

*"Brand Journalism is when any organization creates valuable information and shares it with the world. **Brand Journalism is not a product pitch. It is not an advertorial. It is not an egotistical spewing of gobbledegook-laden corporate drivel.** Instead, Brand Journalism is the creation of Web*

*content – videos, blog posts, photos, charts, graphs, essays, e-books, white papers – that **deliver value to your marketplace and serve to position your organization as one worthy of doing business with.**"*

- David Meerman Scott, 2010<sup>2</sup>

It's possible that you could substitute the words "brand journalism" with "content marketing" and the result would align with the worldview of many marketers in HR technology. However, pay close attention to the parts of the paragraph in bold. While many marketers believe that these qualities are inherent in content marketing, it's probably the area where content marketing comes up short in enterprise technology marketing.

Let's narrow our focus to brand journalism within enterprise technology. Michael Brenner leads content marketing for SAP. He believes that the future of content marketing will draw heavily on lessons from the world of journalism. "Brands will resemble publishers and assemble newsrooms and hire or train journalists who can tell stories and contribute to major publications," he says.<sup>3</sup> And one of the ways that SAP has gone big in the world of brand journalism is through [native advertising](#)<sup>4</sup> with [Forbes AdVoice](#). Google a few keywords on an enterprise software topic and you could easily find yourself on a Forbes.com page that resembles editorial content but is actually SAP copy. And even though much of their work is quite good and relevant to the topic (in my opinion), it has also provoked [some pointed comments within influential HR technology industry circles](#).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> <http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/2012/03/cm-2015-david-meerman-scott/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.b2bmarketinginsider.com/content-marketing/future-of-content-marketing>

<sup>4</sup> For Michael Brenner's take on native advertising, visit this post on the SAP blog: <http://blogs.sap.com/innovation/sales-marketing/2-rules-sponsored-content-0642967>

<sup>5</sup> The LinkedIn HR Technology group discussion thread (registration required, eye rolling highly encouraged): [http://www.linkedin.com/groupitem?view=&gid=1772602&type=member&item=210298885&trk=groups\\_search\\_item\\_list-0-b-cmr&goback=%2Egna\\_1772602](http://www.linkedin.com/groupitem?view=&gid=1772602&type=member&item=210298885&trk=groups_search_item_list-0-b-cmr&goback=%2Egna_1772602)



# WHAT IS BRAND JOURNALISM?

## Two rules for sponsored content

Brenner lays out two concise rules for sponsored content:

1. *Create great content*
2. *Always provide full disclosure*

Great content and disclosure provide the groundwork for reputable brand journalism.

Source:  
<http://blogs.sap.com/innovation/sales-marketing/2-rules-sponsored-content-0642967>

For another example, look at Cisco. As the No. 1 enterprise technology brand in the world and arguably the preeminent provider of content marketing in the industry, their bid in brand journalism is certainly worth your attention.

"[My Networked Life](#)" is a documentary-style video series following the day-to-day lives of 12 young entrepreneurs, demonstrating the power of network technology in the

hands of the next generation. Here's how the Cisco project lead [explained it in a blog post](#): "Our role is to help people understand what Cisco is all about. The technology is enabling what's happening on screen, but you don't always see it." A key point from the blog post: "Though the videos are sponsored by Cisco, the company isn't even mentioned until the last few seconds of each video when the clip is punctuated by a fact from one of Cisco's annual reports."<sup>6</sup>

Although these are only two of many possible interpretations of brand journalism, can we say that brand journalism equals content marketing? Not quite ... but they both can be used in similar ways.

- ▶ **Brand journalism** is telling stories for brand awareness ... but you can also use it to drive leads.
- ▶ **Content marketing** is developing and distributing valuable content for demand generation ... but you can also use it to build brand through thought leadership.

Both are about building trust and credibility. Both should communicate personal value and benefit to the target audience. And whether you want to call it brand journalism, content marketing, or something else, it should be clear that HR technology companies must use content to build their brand. However, HR marketers should fully understand the role of brand in their work before they begin.

<sup>6</sup> <http://engage.synecoretech.com/marketing-technology-for-growth/bid/158351/Brand-Journalism-Cisco-s-Innovative-Approach-to-Online-Content-Marketing>



# WHAT'S THE ROLE OF BRAND IN HR TECHNOLOGY MARKETING?

Brand is the thing that differentiates you from your competitors. It's also the first step in building a relationship with the buyer. Generally speaking, the practice of brand in B2B technology marketing is immature and features-driven. It's usually all about the technology. And technology is always a temporary advantage.

You may believe that it doesn't matter. You may believe that B2C brands have a built-in advantage over B2B brands. After all, they're selling sexy stuff to consumers – sports cars and smartphones. Of course, B2C brands will always be stronger

than B2B brands. It's easy to believe this point of view. It's also incorrect.

A recent research report from the Corporate Executive board shows that some B2B brands – including Cisco, Oracle, and SAP – are connecting with buyers better than B2C ones – even major brands like Apple, Amazon.com, and Target. What gives? How is this even possible?

To answer these questions, you need to understand the six things a brand should do in B2B technology marketing:

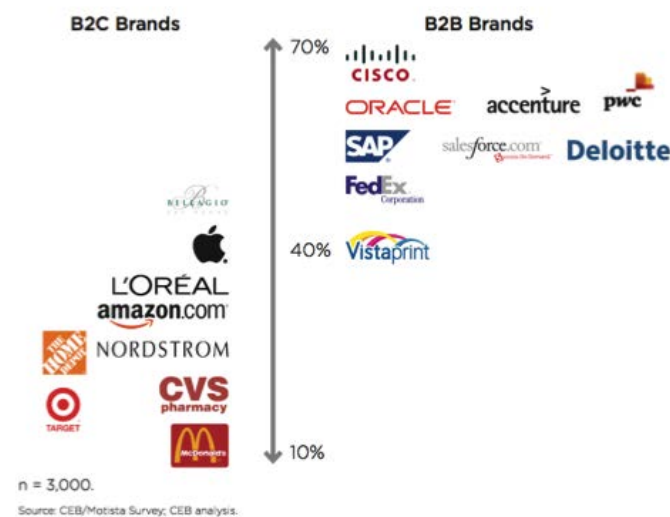
- 5. Features and benefits:** Buyers need to know how you do what you do and what value they get out of it.
- 6. Communication of values:** Buyers need to know what you stand for. You must be able to connect with them on an emotional basis.

The first four aspects on the list won't elicit much disagreement. However, the last two aspects are where B2B technology brands frequently get it wrong.

## Benefits > Features

Too many technology brands typically lead with communication of business value – *your awards, your experience, how many customers you have, and that type of thing*. It's all about *you*. And buyers quite frankly don't care about you.

Talking about features rather than benefits is one of the biggest HR technology brand mistakes. Don't make it all about the technology. Technology is always a temporary

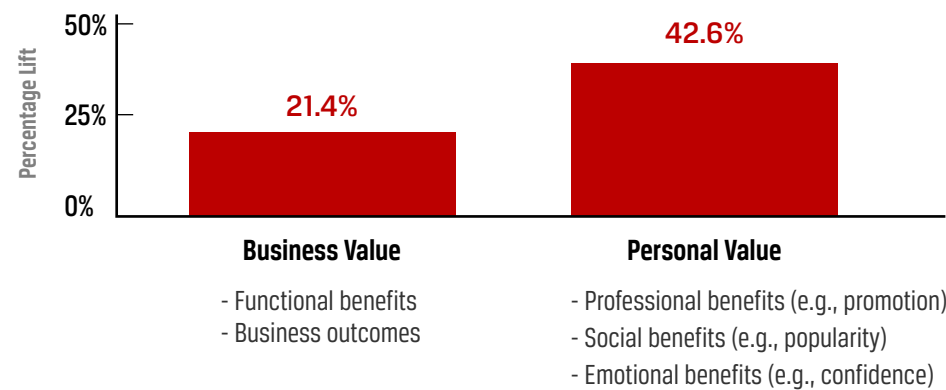


- 1. Recall and recognition:** Buyers must remember you on an unassisted and assisted basis.
- 2. Category identification:** Buyers need to know which toolbox you fit in.
- 3. Functional association:** Buyers need to know what you do – which tool are you in the toolbox?
- 4. Differentiation:** After buyers know which tool in the toolbox you are, they need to know why you are the best tool for a job.



# WHAT'S THE ROLE OF BRAND IN HR TECHNOLOGY MARKETING?

Commercial Impact of Perceived Brand Benefits<sup>a</sup>



n = 3,000 Source: CEB/Motista Survey: CEB analysis

<sup>a</sup> Familiarity, consideration, preference, purchase, repeat purchase, premium payment, internal advocacy, external advocacy.

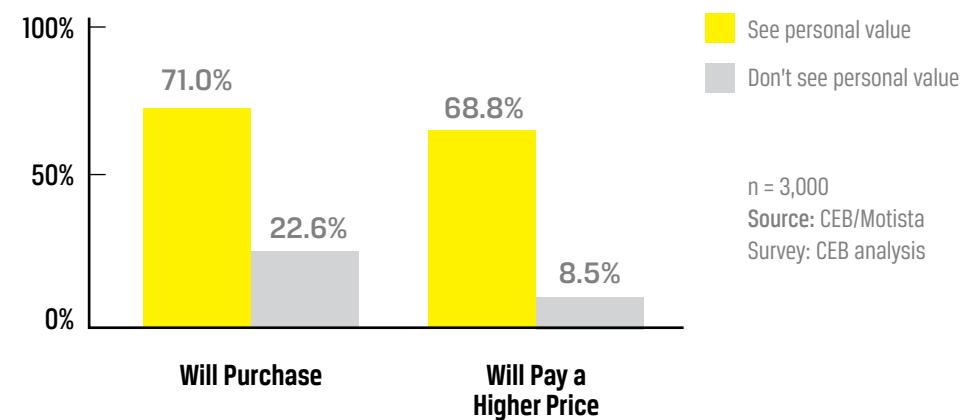
advantage. What brand should be about is communication of your personal value. You need to tell your buyers what's in it for them. What are the benefits of your product or service? Do you offer strategic insight, business agility, improved efficiency, lower costs, or something else? You need to make it crystal clear. And if you do, buyers are far more likely to purchase from you and even pay a higher price.

## Value + Values = Emotional connection

As essential as it is to communicate personal value, that's only half of the equation. You've also got to create an emotional connection based on the alignment of your brand values and the personal values of your buyer.

So, you've probably noticed that we have two very similar words here – value and values. Personal value is pretty straightforward. However, I'm aware that talking about brand and personal values may seem a little bit out there. After all, it's software, right?

Buyers Who Do vs. Don't See Personal Value



Well, no. There's no reason that a technology product can't exist as an ideal rather than just a tool. Communicating at the level of values is far stronger than personal value. If you can align the values of your brand with the attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs of your buyer, you will experience significant brand lift.

Here's an example with a message for a hypothetical social performance management solution. As you know, there's a lot of buzz about social technology solutions replacing traditional approaches to performance management. Without getting into the merits of this perspective, here's one way to communicate the personal **value** a buyer would get from this solution:

*Performance tools based on social technologies are more familiar and intuitive to employees. Employees adopt these tools easily and give more frequent feedback to peers and managers – leading to a more productive, engaged workforce.*



# WHAT'S THE ROLE OF BRAND IN HR TECHNOLOGY MARKETING?

## It's a tough, cruel world

There are three reasons that brand matters more than ever for HR technology companies:

- **Buyers are bombarded with messages.** There are more channels and more distractions. It's harder to rise above the noise. Think about how many more emails you get today than you did five years ago.
- **Buyers are taking on more of the research before they engage with you.** More of the buying journey is over before prospects engage you. According to Forrester: "Today's buyers might be anywhere from two-thirds to 90 percent of the way through their journey before they reach out to the vendor."
- **Conversion rates are going down, cost of customer acquisition is going up.** In our industry, email used to be a solid performer. Now, it's struggling, and conversion rates are lagging. In 2011, .5 percent was the new 1 percent. In 2013, .3 percent is the new .5 percent.

Source:  
Forrester. "Use Behavioral Marketing to Up the Ante in the Age of the Customer."

What the buyer gets out of it is clear: Easier and faster adoption of the solution, which leads to more frequent feedback, which leads to higher employee productivity and engagement.

Now let's communicate about this solution based on **values**:

*Traditional performance management takes a top-down approach that is incompatible with today's workplace. Social performance is better aligned with the grassroots collaboration style of today's knowledge workers.*

This message is meant to connect at an emotional level with a buyer who believes that traditional performance management is broken and that deploying the typical approach is the wrong thing to do because people work differently today. Someone who truly believes this is predisposed to buy a nontraditional performance management solution. They believe deep down in their soul that traditional performance management doesn't work.

If you can show that buyer that you feel the same way, you're selling downhill.

This is the main point: **Emotional connections to your brand increase demand.** You don't choose brand awareness at the expense of demand generation. You choose brand awareness because you care about demand generation. Connecting with a buyer at the values level is far more powerful because it just makes things easier. Unfortunately, too many HR technology marketers are still risk-averse and don't differentiate enough. They settle for "me too" messaging that tries to be all things to all people. Then they deliver their vanilla message with unmemorable creative featuring stock photography of smiling, happy, diverse business people.



# USING CONTENT TO BUILD YOUR BRAND: 9 ESSENTIALS

Even though "authenticity" is one of the most overused words of the past few years, it's still an idea that's relevant to your brand. What do you believe in as a brand? What's your big idea? If you want to achieve the kind of explosive growth that companies in the HR technology space dream of, you've got to take a stand for something. Look at Marc Benioff at [salesforce.com](http://salesforce.com) – The End of Software. You've got to dream big and be unapologetic about it.

After you know your big idea, you can begin building your brand with content. As you get rolling, keep these nine essentials in mind:

**No. 1: You must know your differentiation.** What's really different about you? You need to truly define it beyond features and personal benefits. You must define it at the values level. As you communicate it, you'll connect with buyers who identify with your values. You're looking for your unfair advantage. You'll know when you've really found it.

**No. 2: You must know your audience.** Empathy is the goal. As you create content, don't think about how to sell to your audience. Think about how to be their advocate. Develop personas so you know how to talk with them, not at them or to them. (See the example below.)



## HEATHER: VP OF HR

This buyer is primarily within HR – either a CHRO, EVP/SVP/VP, or Director. The buyer is 95% white, 60%+ female, mid- to late 40s, college-educated, usually with some kind of advanced degree. The buyer is fairly tech-savvy and believes she can evaluate solutions on her own.

- 49 YEARS OLD
- WHITE FEMALE
- MARRIED WITH 2 CHILDREN
- HOMEOWNER
- 17 YRS. OF HR EXPERIENCE
- 5 YRS. WITH CURRENT EMPLOYER
- COLLEGE-EDUCATED
- HOLDS ADVANCED DEGREE

"I arrived an hour and a half early this morning to get ready for the board meeting, where I'll be presenting on the workforce management reports. It's round three of tweaking the budget to meet my CFO's 'cut 6%' order, so I'm meeting with my team to prioritize our activities. Because benefits enrollment is only a few weeks away, I've got to finish the employee dependent audit sooner rather than later. Preferably before the OFCP charge deposition next week. To top it off, I've just been pinged to support the cross-functional planning committee in charge of the company holiday party, and the twelfth person today just knocked on my door asking if I 'had a minute.' Hopefully, it doesn't run too long because my youngest has a basketball game tonight."

**No. 3: You must think like an evangelist.** Like a crusading journalist, pursue The Truth with fervor. Think Woodward and Bernstein. You have to believe in something passionately and feel compelled to tell everybody. Make your brand all about changing the world and you'll create an emotional connection. You'll also see demand increase.

**No. 4: You must have one champion who gets it.** You can outsource your work, but you can't outsource your passion. One person must own and exemplify your passion – whether you call that person a managing editor, a chief content officer, or a brand evangelist. Neil Chase, a former editor for *The New York Times* and Federated Media and now at LifeLock, boils down the skill set to three things:

1. Knowing your brand's goals, message, products, and audiences
2. Telling stories
3. Getting the right tools and partners to produce and distribute content effectively<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.linkedin.com/today/post/article/20130719110203-7374576-why-and-how-brands-should-build-newsrooms>





# USING CONTENT TO BUILD YOUR BRAND: 9 ESSENTIALS

**No. 5: You must commit to producing great, high-quality content.** There's an old joke about army food – it's not very good but there's a lot of it. Don't let the same be said about your content. Favor quality over quantity. There's a lot of noise out there online. Take away a key lesson from dead-tree media: Make sure what you say is worth saying.

**No. 6: You must commit to consistency.** Whether your model is the daily paper or *The Daily Show*, keep up a steady cadence of content. Whether you believe in campaigns or the always-on approach (and you should believe in both), remember that organizing and developing content is a process. That means an editorial calendar.

**No. 7: You must be agile and topical.** Remember this: You're always on a deadline. React to news in the moment. Embrace the urgency of now. And never forget that good content in market today is better than perfect content in market next month. You've heard of agile software development. This is agile content marketing. Be flexible and don't be a slave to

your editorial calendar. Look for opportunities to react to the news of the moment.

**No. 8: You must commit to context.** Deliver the right message to the right person at the right time. (See the matrix below.) How you say something is as important as what you say. Timing is everything. Commit to context (and pay attention, because you are going to hear a lot more about context in the next 12 to 18 months).

**No. 9: You must commit to real, measurable revenue and quality goals, not false ones.** There's no excuse for not measuring your results with content. We're a numbers-driven field. Track your KPIs and focus on quality and revenue. Other metrics are not only less relevant, they can lead you in the wrong direction.

EXPLORER Any potential customer sometime in the future	SUSPECT Anyone in market for your solution	PROSPECT Any suspect who has become a qualified lead (MQL)	OPPORTUNITY Any prospect who is a marketing-generated opportunity (MGO)	CUSTOMER A potential renewal or upsell opportunity
<i>WHAT THEY'RE ASKING FROM YOU</i>				
"Interest me."	"Show me."	"Tell me."	"Convince me."	"Support me."
<b>STAGE OF THE BUYING CYCLE</b>				
<b>Pre-sale: Not in the funnel</b> Individual is one of the following: - Unaware of need - Unsure of need, uncommitted to change - Sure of need, uncommitted to chance	<b>Early Stage: Top of the funnel</b> Individual is: - Determining criteria - Committed to change and exploring possible solutions - Initial inquiry, first level of engagement - Determining level of urgency - Scoping at a high level	<b>Middle Stage: Mid-funnel</b> Individual is: - Exploring possible solutions - Evaluating options - Committing to a solution - Committing to a vendor	<b>Late stage: Low in the funnel</b> Individual is: - Scoping at a detailed level - Making the business case - Justifying the decision - Resolving issues - Finalizing the selection - Closing the deal	<b>Post-sale: Support/upsell</b> Individual is: - Implementing the solution - Engaging employees to adopt the solution - Considering additional purchases - Deciding whether to renew or look for another vendor



# CONCLUSION

## Want to hire a bunch of journalists?

Before you go nuts hiring a bunch of former editors and reporters for your marketing team, be careful. Make sure you hire the ones who get it. There are lots of dinosaurs out there. Also, remember that lots of people got into journalism because they can't do math. Not a great fit for an increasingly data-driven field. Finally, know that journalists can be challenging to manage. They're naturally dubious and argumentative. They believe that shouting is a perfectly acceptable form of communication. And they're skeptical of spin and don't like "The Man."

The other day, I had a beer with an old friend from my days in the newsroom. He covers a business beat that touches on environmental issues, and he was thinking about making the jump to marketing. Before I could give him the advice I almost never give – stay in the news business because it's what you're meant to do – he arrived at that conclusion on his own. It turns out that the thing that gets him up in the morning is being the voice of the public and serving as their advocate.

That conclusion was the right thing for him, but there's no reason that we can't bring that same sense of mission to our work in HR technology. We are working to solve the No. 1 business challenge of the 21st century – talent. IF YOU ONLY REMEMBER ONE THING FROM THIS ENTIRE PAPER, it's to think like a journalist. How will your work benefit your audience? How can you make their lives better?

Whether or not you think that brand journalism is a buzzword, remember that it contains a lot of ideas that you should have been practicing all along. So now it's time for a gut check. Can you put these ideas into practice? If you're not doing them already, you may find it's easier said than done. You've gotta get good with three things:

1. It's not all about you.
2. You've gotta give stuff away (that means non-gated content).
3. You've gotta give away more of the secret sauce than you'd like.

**Difficult? Maybe. Doable? Yes. Good luck!**



## ABOUT STEVE SMITH

Steve Smith is a partner at The Starr Conspiracy, a strategic marketing and advertising agency that focuses on strategy, brand development, demand generation, and digital media for enterprise software companies. The agency has worked with hundreds of HR technology software and services clients since 1999 – from early-stage startups to established industry leaders. He's also Executive Managing Editor for The Starr Conspiracy Intelligence Unit, an experienced team of thought leadership and research experts who deliver strategic guidance and big ideas you need to improve marketing results and truly connect with buyers. Steve has developed industry-leading brand and message positions for many category leaders in enterprise software and authored more than 500 white papers and research reports on HR technology and human capital management topics. He's also a former newspaper journalist and HR communications consultant for enterprise-class companies in healthcare, transportation, energy, and commercial real estate.

## ABOUT THE STARR CONSPIRACY

You shouldn't have to pay an agency to get to know your industry. The Starr Conspiracy already knows your market segment, who you are, and where you fit in. We're a strategic marketing and advertising agency devoted exclusively to enterprise software and services. When you partner with us, it's to build market share, multiply brand awareness, and drive sales leads – not to bone up on the basics. We've been "out there" for more than a decade, so you can hit the ground running. Founded in 1999 and located in Fort Worth, Texas, The Starr Conspiracy has won eight best places to work awards and countless creative awards.

Visit us on the Web at [www.thestarrconspiracy.com](http://www.thestarrconspiracy.com).

