

What do CxOs read?

What B2B marketers need to know about
creating content for the C-suite

Contents

- Introduction
- Where to catch a CxO's eye
 - CxOs read selectively - so you have to break into their network
 - Seeking information: the role of media and search
- Why CxOs read
 - CxOs are big picture thinkers
 - CxOs are horizon scanners
 - Jobs to be done: what content need to deliver
- CxOs want it simpler than you think
 - Complexity is a big turnoff
 - There's no time for overly long content
- What else puts CxOs off?
 - Fluff and theory
 - A generalist approach
 - A hard sell
- Conclusion

Introduction

If B2B marketing is a game of chess, the C-suite represents the King and Queen. If you can get them in your sights, victory might not be 100% guaranteed but it's certainly going to be that much easier. Get their attention and your sales team will be a step closer to an introduction to their procurement team, a high value partnership, or even an invitation to tender for an enterprise level project.

Of course, we don't need to tell you how elusive CxOs are, how difficult it is to anticipate what they're thinking and what they need. You have already hit your head against this particular wall.

There are just so many questions that need to be answered. What is it that CxOs actually care about? What topics will get their attention? What format suits them best? Where can you actually get in front of them? Do they even have time to read at all?

That's what we set out to learn. Through a series of interviews with C-level execs from the likes of Groupon, cardfactory and The Very Group, plus a wider pool of individuals who completed our survey¹, we were able to draw out key themes that came up again and again.

Some of these findings - for instance, just how very busy CxOs are - won't surprise you at all. Others might. All will help you develop a content strategy that has a far higher chance of succeeding than one based on guesswork.

Let's dive in...

1. Where to catch a CxO's eye

"You need to start with your audience in mind" is Content Marketing 101, but this only becomes more important when it comes to the elusive, busy, in-demand CxOs. Create anything that lies beyond the narrow window of their peripheral vision and it won't stand a chance of getting seen. So what are they actually reading and where are they going in order to find it in the first place?

Our survey said...

What type of content do you read for work related purposes? (select all that apply)

- 78% LinkedIn articles
- 66% General business press (e.g. HBR, FT, The Economist, Barron's)
- 53% Specific industry press
- 53% Non-fiction books
- 44% Blogs
- 41% White papers / ebooks / reports
- 31% Case studies

How do you tend to discover the content you read? (please choose your top 3)

- 78% Links on social media
- 69% Shared with me by a colleague
- 69% Google search
- 16% Shared with me by a key partner
- 3% Direct marketing

CxOs read selectively - so you have to break into their network

Social media was the clear winner in terms of both content type and discovery location. 78% of the CxOs we surveyed said they read LinkedIn articles for work purposes and, looking across all

¹ Survey completed by 32 CxOs and senior leaders. Organisation size 5,000+ (19%), 2,000-5,000 (12%), 500-2,000 (16%), 50-500 (53%).

types of content, the same proportion said they discovered the content they read via links on social media.

With almost 16 million LinkedIn users having ownership or senior C-suite positions within their organisations², it's no surprise that this is a good way to reach a CxO. But it's not as simple as sending a connection request or a DM with a link to your latest article.

Most CxOs have a carefully curated network, both online and offline. What was clear from our interviews was the fact that they're interested in hearing from peers, industry leaders, and other people they trust. Cold outreach is rarely effective, as many senior leaders are surrounded by gatekeepers tasked with ensuring only the most important information reaches them.

As a result, only 3% of survey respondents said they discover content through direct marketing, whereas 69% said they had read content after it was shared with them by a colleague.

"I mostly read content that is shared by people that I highly regard because I know that if they are sharing it, it will likely be of a high quality and interest," says Francisco de Sousa, CFO at Groupon International.

Dan Wood, Chief People Officer at UWE, agrees. "I read a lot from LinkedIn, usually because someone in my network, whose opinion I trust and value, has said something about it or commented on it and or maybe even reposted it. That acts as an endorsement: 'I'm interested so it might be interesting to you'."

Breaking into a CxO's network might take some out-of-the-box thinking but it's the surest way to capture their interest.

"A recommendation from someone I know is a very powerful way to get my attention," says Ben Fletcher, Group CFO at The Very Group, "Content creators should be thinking about the concentric circles around their target audience."

If you haven't got a direct connection, social media groups and communities based on shared backgrounds, interests and even values can all be helpful. This might include educational alumni groups, professional body membership groups, and communities dedicated to businesses with a common theme, from industry sector to B Corp certification.

Jennifer Lawrence, Chief People and Transformation Officer at cardfactory, is a member of the HR Ninjas group on Facebook, the UK's biggest social media community of HR professionals. Brands can apply to be referral partners in the group, putting them in front of a warm audience.

"That's a good example of the power of a network and the referrals that come through a network which has got credibility to it," she says.

² [50 Social Selling Statistics You Need to Know in 2023](#), Hubspot, published 22 December 2022

Chief Operations and Legal Officer Max Inglis agrees: “If you can create a community of people that you can identify with, that's always beneficial.”

Seeking information: the role of media and search

As well as social media, traditional media is an important source of information for CxOs. 66% of survey respondents said they read general business press such as Harvard Business Review, the Financial Times and Barron's, with 53% saying they read specific industry press.

Tobin Murphy-Coles is CEO at Lumina, an ESG employee benefits tech provider, and was formerly CCO at AON.

He says: “I read the broadsheets for a global news perspective and to consume economic data, as well as titles like The Economist. I also read magazines like Southwest Business Insider just to get a sense of what's going on in and around our local area. And then I read the sector specific stuff like Corporate Advisor and HR Director, which I would categorise as me keeping up with key trends in our sector.”

But when there's a particular question to be asked or subject to be explored, CxOs will often turn, unsurprisingly, to Google. 69% discover content this way, usually when they want to understand a trending topic better.

Ben Fletcher says: “When I want to educate myself about something - when I've heard something being discussed in the boardroom or in the business and I think actually I need to educate myself a bit more on that - my start point is Google.”

So social media is good if you can get into the right networks. Search will help if you know what your audience is looking for. And you might catch your CxOs attention if you get into the right media publications.

The next question is, assuming you can get in front of them, what exactly should you be writing about to hold their interest? What is it that CxOs are interested in?

Key takeaways

- LinkedIn is a good place to find CxOs but you'll need to break into their network
- The go-to for news is the press rather than marketing content
- CxOs will use search when they want to understand a trending topic better

What this means for your content

There is no single channel that will guarantee you an audience with a CxO. You'll need to have a presence on social media, think carefully about SEO, work at your PR, and build your

networks. Content always needs to be produced strategically and this is even more important when you're trying to get in front of the C-suite.

2. Why CxOs read

While demographics and firmographics are useful, when it comes to creating a content strategy, psychographics are far more interesting. What does your audience care about? What are the challenges they're facing? How do they make decisions? Why do they behave the way they do?

Our research highlighted two key insights into the kinds of people CxOs are, both of which directly impact the type of content they consume.

CxOs are big picture thinkers

First, CxOs are big picture thinkers. They rarely get involved in the details - especially as their company or team size increases - so they're more interested in leadership than the specifics of what happens on the ground floor level.

"I'm lucky to have a team of 110 people," says Ben Fletcher. "So a lot of detailed work is done lower down the organisation. Therefore my primary concern is, how do I get the best out of the team and the best for the team?"

Jennifer Lawrence agrees. If her business were in the market for a new HR system, for example, she'd want to know enough to have a perspective and to be able to direct her team. But she wouldn't actually be leading the procurement process.

"The reality is my leadership team would take the lead on the detail," she says.

"I'm more in the space of looking for inspiration. I'm looking for confidence that our people agenda is fresh and contemporary and I'm not missing anything that anybody else might be doing. It's not as specific as 'I'm looking for a new HR system'."

CxOs are horizon scanners

Which leads us to the second insight about CxOs - they are horizon-scanners. A big part of their job is to stand at the helm of the ship and provide a forecast for the rest of the crew, anticipating what's coming so that they can steer everyone along the most successful course.

"I read to make sense of the broader picture, anticipate the future, see what trends are emerging in our sector and beyond," says UWE's Dan Wood. "Innovation, ideas and insights that we can draw into our organisation from other places - those are the things that I focus on."

Nicole Kapel was a CFO within a large group of companies with a combined turnover of 2.3bn Euros before she moved to a COO role in an environmental startup. For her to perform in her role, which she describes as “pure advisory”, she needs to stay on top of what’s relevant.

She explains: “For example, the hottest topic that has shaken up not only my profession but the world as a whole is sustainability. Now my industry is asking itself ‘how can we produce financial statements that are meaningful? Statements that still answer in-depth questions of our financial operational performance but also provide insight into how we are operating in regards to our responsibility towards our planet and people?’

“My role is absorbing that knowledge from the industry, and boiling it down so that I can advise not only the board but my operational teams, our health and safety department, and our quality functions. So that I can say ‘hey guys, we need to measure *this* output in *this* way consistently so we can produce *that* set of KPIs that the industry now requires us to do.’”

Jobs to be done: what content needs to deliver

Our survey said...

For what reasons might you read business marketing content?

- 69% To get an overview of a subject I don’t know much about
- 59% To gauge an industry view on a subject
- 53% General interest / enjoyment / personal and professional development
- 44% To get an answer to a specific question
- 41% In order to better contribute to a specific discussion
- 22% To help choose / narrow down a list of suppliers / partners

What keeps you engaged with a piece of content?

- 74% Original opinion / thought leadership
- 68% Trends / predictions
- 48% Links to relevant research (e.g. a McKinsey report, a university study)
- 35% Current case studies / use cases
- 29% Real / personal stories and anecdotes
- 10% Quotes from senior industry leaders

So, how does understanding that CxOs are big-picture horizon-scanners relate to content? Well, it shows up in what they want to engage with. When we asked why they would read marketing content such as blog posts or LinkedIn articles, there were two main reasons:

- 1) To get an overview of a subject they don’t know much about (69%)
- 2) To gauge an industry view on a subject (59%)

And, following on from that, the two best ways to keep them engaged is to include original opinion / thought leadership and trends / predictions in your content, with 74% and 68% of our survey respondents respectively agreeing this would hold their attention.

Another effective tactic is to guide C-suite readers to the sorts of questions they should be asking, since this is a key role that these senior leaders play within their organisations. In his interview, Ben Fletcher highlighted the useful content produced by the British Retail Consortium in the lead up to Brexit.

He explains: “They said, ‘Look, we can't answer many of your questions until everything is agreed and resolved and, until we know what the future looks like, it's very hard to answer points of detail.’ But what they did a really good job of saying is, ‘If you're sitting in a boardroom, and you're not asking *these* questions, you're not having the right conversation.’

“Often our job is about asking questions,” he adds. “So for people at C-suite board level, or even just below the board, providing questions to ask is a really helpful and powerful thing to do. Content that says ‘here are three things to make you look a bit smarter in the boardroom’, that's content that will be well received.”

Key takeaways

- CxOs don't tend to get involved in the detail, they're more interested in direction, strategy and leadership than choosing new suppliers
- They want overviews on subjects they don't know about and a sense of what their industry is doing
- They want help understanding which questions they should be asking

What this means for your content

Think about how your brand or products connect to the bigger picture. Rather than writing about employee benefits platforms, for example, write about the employee experience and how it's changing. Keep it high level, insightful and future focused - and don't be afraid to have an opinion.

3. CxOs want it simpler than you think

So CxOs want big picture content that gives them an overview of a subject, helps them to understand new topics or spot key trends. But there's a caveat.

Regardless of how engaging or useful a piece of content is, if it's not written, presented and packaged well, your C-suite audience is going to lose interest pretty quickly.

Our survey said...

What makes you stop reading / dismiss a piece of content? (please choose your top 3)

- 56% Too complex / poorly explained
- 53% Too long
- 50% Poorly formatted (e.g. no subheads, images etc to break up text)
- 38% No data / reliable sources
- 28% It's old news / 'so what' factor
- 22% Doesn't deliver what the title promised
- 22% Too basic / simplified

Complexity is a big turnoff

It might not be a surprise to hear that the number one bugbear for CxOs is content that's too complex or poorly explained (56%). What's worth noting is that they are least likely to be put off by content that is 'too basic / simplistic' (22%).

"Often the content I see overestimates the level of technical interest I have and underestimates the need to explain it really simply," says Ben Fletcher. "At a senior level, we have to do so much reading as part of the job - accounting papers, annual reports, board papers - so the simpler a bit of content is, the easier it's going to be for us to say, 'Okay, I get it.'

"People like to say, 'Let me show you all of the complexity of this thing I've thought about.' If what you live for is ESG or flexible payments, of course you become an enthusiast for it. But it's really critical to keep it as simple, to make it as easy as possible for people to read."

What the C-suite really want, says cardfactory's Jennifer Lawrence, is someone to do some of the heavy lifting for them.

"In lockdown when the CJRS (Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme) was introduced, the content that would grab me would be 'demystifying the CJRS'," she says.

"It would be, 'We've done all the hard work for you, we've captured all the data from the various different sources and now we're going to make your life really easy by laying out the rules and the implications. Don't worry about searching in lots of different places - here you have it.'"

A big part of keeping content simple is about the language you use, avoiding jargon and unnecessarily convoluted words and instead sticking to plain English.

"I'm a big fan of plain, simple language," says Dan Wood. "I just want something that's accessible and clearly written. I don't want to read an article that has hugely long sentences and that waffles on."

Max Inglis agrees. “It just has to be simple. And it has to be relevant. You’ve got to understand the problem and have a title that says, clearly and concisely, that you can solve it. People do not have the bandwidth to accommodate more.”

There’s no time for overly long content

Content that “waffles on” is not just Dan and Max’s pet hate. 53% of our C-suite survey respondents said they would stop reading or dismiss a piece of content if it was too long. They simply don’t have enough time to wade through more words than are absolutely necessary.

Our survey said...

On average, how much time do you spend reading this type of content (blog posts, white papers, case studies etc) each week? (select one)

- 6% 0-10 minutes
- 28% 10-30 minutes
- 25% 30-60 minutes
- 25% 1-2 hours
- 16% 2+ hours

A vast majority (84%) of our survey respondents spend less than two hours a week reading - and the largest proportion of those gave content just 10-30 minutes of their attention, with 6% having only 10 minutes or less to spare.

“My life is planned from the start of the day to the end of the day,” says Ben Fletcher. “The last thing I want to do in my spare time is read about work. And so the challenge for anyone producing content is to be compelling enough - quickly - to make it worth my while.”

Jennifer says she spends a maximum of two hours each week reading for work. “I just seem to spend my life in back to back meetings,” she says. “And so those couple of hours would be grabbed on a quick LinkedIn scroll at some point throughout the day or in an evening or over the weekend.”

Tobin has even less attention to give content. “I’ve pretty much never read anything that was over three minutes long,” he says. “And I would never read every word, I’d skim the headline bits of it. So it’s about being punchy and succinct.”

Key takeaways

- CxOs want to understand new topics quickly
- There is no time for complexity or waffle

What it means for your content

Concise, straightforward and easy to read content wins, every time.

4. What else puts CxOs off?

Complexity and waffle aren't the only things that put CxOs off. In many cases, content fails to grab or hold their attention because of a lack of data, research and application, or simply because the content is aimed at selling rather than educating.

Fluff and theory

Well over a third (38%) of our respondents said that a lack of data and credible sources would put them off reading a piece of content.

Francisco de Sousa says, "When you think about the kind of content that you get in newspapers like the Financial Times, it tends to be very insightful, backed up by reputable and solid sources of information. So I do like it when content comes my way with valuable insights that are equally backed up by facts and have solid references."

That data also needs to be interpreted and, crucially, be made practical in order to create genuinely valuable content. In Dan Wood's words, it's about going beyond the abstract and delivering "insight, intervention and impact"..

"A good article helps me translate a trend or innovation into an understanding of what I can do in my role and in my workplace," he says. "It has to have some meaningful, practical application within it, some suggestions about how to derive value from its insight to help me solve challenges and problems.

"I recently read a piece of research from Gartner about the role of the CHRO, linking some of the big trends in the sector to a CHRO's areas of capability. So it was saying, given that we're seeing these trends in the world of work, this is what you need to focus on in terms of skills and knowledge. That was very helpful."

A generalist approach

CxOs don't have time to extrapolate the information that's relevant to them from a generalist piece of content. They don't just want to understand a topic in broad terms, they want to know how it will impact their business, with all the nuances of its size, sector and so on.

As Ben Fletcher puts it, "You need to see a little bit of yourself and your own situation in what's being said."

If you can do enough research to know what your particular CxO is facing right now, so much the better. Content is a powerful tool within an account based marketing strategy.

“First understand exactly who the company is that you are trying to pitch to and learn as much as you can about their business, their strategy,” says Francisco de Sousa. “What are their main challenges and opportunities? Now, does your content align with that?”

Without research, you also risk alienating your audience by making assumptions. Nicole Kapel says she’s often frustrated by how finance professionals are lumped together under the same umbrella, when there are actually many nuances involved.

“To the non-finance community, we are all the same,” she says. “But I can tell you that even when a tax specialist speaks to an accounting system specialist, they’re speaking about completely different things. They might sound like they’re using the same words but those words are almost a foreign language sometimes, because they’re misinterpreted.

“In the line of work I do, I am not a specialist of any one particular financial subject, I would consider myself a generalist. I think it is critical that people boil down that technical speak and bring it to a common denominator to avoid the gaps in the interfaces between sub segments of the finance - or any other - function.”

A hard sell

Perhaps the quickest way to turn a CxO off is to go in with a hard sell. In section 02, we looked at why CxOs read. Only 22% engaged with content with the specific goal of choosing or narrowing down a list of suppliers. So we need to view content as a tool not for short-term sales but long-term relationship building.

This longer term focus is particularly relevant when you consider that at any one time, 95% of a B2B audience is simply not in the market to buy³.

“Most of the time I’m not immediately in the market for any kind of solution,” Ben Fletcher confirms. “But I’m happy to be stimulated and as a result of that have people on my radar who I think, ‘Okay, you’ve made me stop and think, and this is something I may need to come back to in due course.’

“The prospect of a conversation that isn’t expected to go anywhere actually makes it much more likely that it will. The ones that I immediately withdraw from are the sales pitchy ones. I just don’t have the time to do that. But chatting, chewing the fat, that’s more interesting. It’s a longer burn but more effective.”

When a buying opportunity does arise, it’s those people who have invested in the long term relationship who are front of mind and therefore first in line to pitch.

³ [Advertising effectiveness and the 95-5 rule](#), Professor John Dawes, Ehrenberg-Bass Institute

“People who've been generous with their perspective, where there's been an interesting dialogue, that definitely goes to the top,” says Ben.

“I can think of examples where I've said, 'I'd like you to be part of this procurement process for this project because I think what you've explained to me previously would really help.' And often - not every time, but often - they've then won that business.”

Tobin Murphy-Coles agrees, “My inbox is full of requests to read this or that, most of which are ignored until there's a problem. Then you go trawling back through them.”

Key takeaways

- It's important to CxOs that any data contained within content is reliable and backed up
- Insights are good but practical and applicable guidance is better
- The more directly a piece of content relates to a CxOs own situation, the more likely they are to engage with it
- A hard sell is the quickest way to lose a CxOs interest

What it means for your content

When creating content for the C-suite, you need to think like a journalist rather than a salesperson. Be helpful and informative, share relevant insights and make sure you can back up your assertions, and always link what you're writing about to the CxO's role so they can apply it. And whatever you do, don't sell until you're invited to.

Conclusion: content creators need to reframe CxOs

CxOs do read - but not as much as content creators might hope. They simply don't have the time. When they do, they turn first to trusted sources like the traditional press and to their own networks, especially on LinkedIn. And they're not there to be sold to. In fact, they're rarely involved with the day-to-day selection of suppliers.

So, if it's that hard to reach them and you can't really sell to them anyway, should you even bother creating content for CxOs? The answer is yes - but with a fresh perspective.

CxOs are not your buyers. They are the agenda setters. They chart the course for their entire business. It is the C-suite that will decide whether to reduce embodied carbon, invest in cultural transformation, or prioritise open ecosystems, even if they're not choosing the construction company or the leadership consultants or the white-labelled software themselves.

Their understanding of key issues will open up opportunities lower down the organisational structure, where there are others for whom you can create middle and bottom of funnel content designed to get you a meeting, or a demo opportunity, or a place on the tender list.

For CxOs, the focus needs to be on high-level, top-of-funnel content that moves the conversation forward. Expertise-based thought leadership packed with data and real world examples that simply and concisely encapsulates big picture issues, and delivers insights they can apply in their own organisations.

There needs to be a plan, too, for how that content will reach your chosen CxO, whether you can break into their LinkedIn network, secure an introduction at an event or earn a mention in a trusted industry publication.

Finally, you need to be willing to play the long game. To patiently and generously invest in relationship, to build trust, and to earn the right, one day, when the need arises, to make your pitch - which may well be the most lucrative of your career.

About RH&Co

Rin Hamburgh & Co is a strategic brand copywriting agency based in Bristol, UK. We specialise in working with expert-led businesses to create hard-hitting thought leadership content that builds brand awareness and authority, and allows them to lead the conversation.

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