

Building brand authority:

Why expertise-based content wins in a cynical age

Introduction

Tackling noise and cynicism in a post-truth world

No 21st century business would disagree with the assertion that the technological advances of the last couple of decades have fundamentally changed the marketing industry.

From build-it-yourself-website platforms to single-print self-publishing services to ChatGPT-generated content, the barriers to entering the competition for people's attention has never been lower. Winning that competition, however, has never been more challenging.

But the challenge is not simply that it's difficult to be heard above the noise. The ease with which literally anyone can publish content has made people cynical. As a result, they're no longer asking, "What can you tell me?" Instead, they're demanding, "Who are you to tell me?"

In this context, not only is it not enough to create content. It's not even enough to create articulate content, or content that hooks people's attention on social media, or tick's the right boxes for Google's ever-changing algorithms.

Instead, businesses need to dig deep into the knowledge, skills and experience within their people and create content that is brimming with something AI-driven content mills can't reproduce: expertise.

Expertise is, firstly, a positioning strategy

There are many ways to position a brand in a marketplace. You can compete on price or personality, values, location or, if you're lucky, the uniqueness of your product or service offering. Or you can choose an expertise-based positioning strategy.

Expertise builds trust. It encourages loyalty. It allows you to charge a premium because it shows you're wiser and sharper than the next brand - and you can prove it. If members of your team have mastered certain disciplines and subjects, why would you try to compete on price?

This strategy is also a strong choice because it's difficult to emulate. You can't fake expertise, or not for long anyway. Only a few brands have what it takes to even qualify - and fewer know how to translate the expertise within their business into marketing strategy.

But, if it is to have an impact, expertise-based positioning can't simply be a strategic choice. It needs to be executed well. In other words, you can't just say you're an expert, you have to prove it.

Why choose an expertise-based positioning strategy?

- Expertise builds trust
- Expertise encourages loyalty
- As an expert you can charge a premium
- Expertise is difficult to emulate

Part 01: What is an expert?

The difference between skill, knowledge and language

The Merriam Webster dictionary defines an expert as someone with a special skill or knowledge representing mastery of a particular subject.

Already we've got two different nuances here - skill vs knowledge. A skill is related to something you can do, so an example of a skilled expert might be a master carpenter or senior software engineer. Then you have the more knowledge-based experts, like university professors or management consultants.

There's a third type of expertise too: interactional expertise, which surgeon and author Dr Roger Kneebone¹ describes in his book, *Expert*, as the "ability to speak the language of experts whose work you cannot do."

An example of a profession that takes interactional expertise to its highest point is journalism, since journalists write expertly about many subjects in which they themselves are not experts. We'd like to suggest that the best copywriters and content marketers fall into this category too.

"You may be born with talent but you won't be an expert until you've put in the time, not to mention effort."

¹ Kneebone, R (2020), *Expert: Understanding the path to mastery*. Viking.

What does it take to become an expert?

Of course, having some level of knowledge or skill doesn't automatically make you an expert. You have to work for it. That said, the moment you can call yourself an expert is also not a clearly defined milestone. It's an ongoing and evolving process. So how do you become an expert?

It was Canadian journalist and author Malcolm Gladwell² who popularised the '10,000 hour rule', which essentially says that to become an expert at something you need to put in 10,000 hours of practice or study. This is actually an over-simplification of the work of psychologist K Anders Ericsson³ but it makes an important point, which is that there is a degree of time needed to become an expert. You may be born with talent but you won't be an expert until you've put in the time, not to mention effort.

Dr Kneebone describes this evolution as the Apprentice-Journeyman-Master pathway. As an apprentice you're putting in the time under someone else's tuition or guidance. Next, you become a journeyman and, archaic term aside, this is where things start to shift. You move from supervised to independent practice, you start to take responsibility, develop your own style, and you learn to improvise.

Only then, once you've spent a significant period of time in this journeyman stage, do you finally step into being a Master. This is where you actually begin redefining your field of expertise, building on it and adding to the knowledge base, pioneering new things, even passing it on - in other words, teaching.

As you can see, there is no way to shortcut expertise. Even those born with extraordinary abilities - from Mozart to Serena Williams, Marie Curie to Bill Gates - all need to put in the time and effort required to claim the title of expert. Likewise, there's no point building a brand positioning or marketing strategy around expertise unless you or your team has spent years accumulating it.

What makes Mozart, Serena Williams, Marie Curie and Bill Gates experts?

1) They put in the time

Each of these individuals was born with a degree of natural talent but it took time and effort to develop that talent into expertise.

² Gladwell, M. (2008), *Outliers: The Story of Success*. Little, Brown and Company.

³ Ericsson, Krampe and Tesch-Romer (1993), *The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance*

This idea was encapsulated in Malcolm Gladwell's book, *Outliers*, where he described the 10,000 hour rule, a simplification of a study by psychologist K Anders Ericsson.

2) They learned from others

In his book *Expert*, Dr Roger Kneebone describes the journey towards expertise as the Apprentice-Journeyman-Master pathway.

Each of these experts began by learning the basics from someone who was further along the journey. Not only did this take time but the desire to learn and the ability to take feedback.

3) They changed the conversation

Having put in the time, these experts reached the Master stage and began redefining their fields of expertise. They didn't just join the conversation, they led it.

Marie Curie discovered polonium and radium. Mozart created over 800 original works. They weren't simply copying what everyone else did, they forged new paths.

How do people perceive expertise?

Let's assume for the moment that there is a genuine level of expertise within your business - it may lie with the founder, the CTO, the product development team or a handful of consultants. Now the question is: can you prove it? Because what is there and what people see are often two vastly different things.

When you're scoping out a business to see if they're experts - let's imagine you're an SME looking for an ESG consultant, armed with nothing more than a handful of names from Google or LinkedIn - there are a few boxes you're going to expect them to be able to tick as a baseline...

Understanding

First, you'll want to know that they understand you - your sector, your challenges, your goals. If you're a multinational FMCG brand, you're likely to discount the consultancy that has specialised in SMEs or the hospitality sector.

Clarity

You'll also want to get some clarity around the problems you're facing. Some help digging below your surface level symptoms to uncover what's really going on. A bit of guidance and even empathy goes a long way here and also helps to show they actually understand you.

Insight

You'll also want your expert to be able to give you insights - to show you what you don't know. An expert will educate you, give you the data, the trends. What is it you should be focusing your attention on? What questions should you be asking?

Solutions

Where you have a problem, you'll expect them to be able to show you what solutions are available - not just what they can do for you as a service provider, but all the possibilities. What are the pros and cons of each? What are the cost implications?

Recommendations

And you'll expect them to be able to give you some recommendations. Again, this is not about them pushing their solution but about them really understanding you and showing that they care about you getting the right outcome, even if that isn't working with them.

The differentiator... Evidence

And then finally - and this is most crucial - you'll want them to be able to back up everything they say. You're about to spend a lot of money and take a big risk. You need to know they can walk the walk as well as talking the talk.

Part 02: How to establish brand authority

What expert-led businesses need to understand about positioning and content strategy

Now bear in mind that a lot of the points in part 01 are going to be part of the service that is ultimately delivered to you. By the end of your engagement with whichever ESG consultancy you choose, they should have hit each of these marks.

But remember, we're talking about choosing the firm in the first place. You haven't worked with them yet - you haven't even booked your free, no obligation consultation - you've just got a handful of names.

So how can they show you that they understand you more than the next brand? That they have deep insights into your problem and can navigate you through the possible solutions? That they have experience and get results and that they actually care?

First, you have to define your expertise

Before you can convince others of your expertise - and that might be yours personally, if you're a founder, CTO, product lead or the like, or that which is contained within others in your business - you really need to thoroughly understand what that expertise is and be able to clearly define and articulate it.

In part this is a deliberate decision around positioning. The more you (as an individual or brand) specialise - horizontally or vertically - the more concentrated your experience and therefore your expertise becomes. So an app development agency specialising in React Native or working purely with telco brands is going to be better able to serve clients in this area than a generalist agency, and will be perceived as more expert by their chosen audience.

But your value proposition may be more nuanced than this and so communicating it may not be straightforward. This is why, before you can create a content strategy designed to build your reputation as an expert brand, you need to clarify and communicate your brand message.

"The more you specialise - horizontally or vertically - the more concentrated your experience and therefore your expertise becomes."

What experts need to know about their audience

Of course, communication is as much about who is listening as who is speaking, whether we're talking about foundational messaging or the content you build upon it. That means you need to have a deep understanding of your audience.

This is the case across all marketing but in particular, for expertise-based content, you need to think about two things:

- 1) What is their knowledge base?

As an expert brand, you need to be very clear on how knowledgeable your audience already is - or isn't - about your subject area. This will determine both where you pitch your content and how high a bar you need to meet to establish that expertise.

Let's say you're a private chiropractic clinic looking to create content for your patient audience. They might need to be talked through the basics of what chiropractic medicine is and why it's beneficial but they'll probably assume that there is a level of expertise within your practice.

Imagine, however, you're a chiropractic-led medtech company looking to sell your platform to an audience of orthopaedic surgeons or an NHS trust. That audience is already highly knowledgeable and they're likely to be much more sceptical about your expertise, so your content will need to work that much harder.

2) How much do they care about?

Another thing you'll need to know about your audience is which aspects of your expertise they care about. Because there's a good chance that there's a very big chunk of it that they literally don't want to hear about at all.

You (or your subject matter experts, if you're the marketer in charge of content) might be happy to geek out on spiral dynamics or financial compliance legislation but your audience wants to know how to lead a successful team or get their app processing payments more quickly.

They want to see that you understand how what you do links into their world. How can you make it useful to them? If expertise is high grade cashmere, then expertise-based content is a hand knitted cashmere jumper.

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Content strategy for expert-led businesses

Content strategy is too big a subject for us to go into in much detail here. Content pillars, buyer journeys, content categories like 'how tos' and 'roundups' - that's content marketing theory 101. If you're a subject matter expert, these are all things you're going to need to brush up on, or you're going to need to hire yourself a marketer.

But marketing knowledge alone isn't enough to create expertise-based content. The truth is that plenty of brands provide useful content - guidance, education, data, trends, facts - by drawing on the internet and reiterating what other people know. There's no subject matter expertise present to elevate it.

To imbue your content with that final level of authority, you need one of two things:

Demonstrable experience

The more you can link your content into real life, the more anecdotes and stories and case studies you can thread through your content, the more weight it will have.

For instance, one of our clients is a highly experienced executive search consultant with decades of experience under his belt. Every one of the blog posts we've worked on with him has been stuffed so full of detailed real life situations that the reader is left in no doubt as to his lived experience and deeply practical knowledge. It also means his story-filled content stands out when set against the dry explainer content that exists elsewhere in his field.

Original research

This links back to Dr Kneebone's Master stage, where you're actually shaping your field.

Another client of ours, a purpose-led HR consultancy with an ESG employee benefits tech platform, recently commissioned a study and worked with us to create a report on how climate conscious employees are, weaving together the data with insights from the subject matter experts within their team.

Now when they're creating content about how employees are more climate conscious and how leaders need to think about this when they're choosing their employee benefits, they're not just regurgitating what everyone else is saying, they actually have something unique that they can refer to.

The importance of collaboration

We've already acknowledged that there are plenty of brands creating content based on what's already out there. Increasingly, you might argue that they don't even need marketers to do this work - tools like ChatGPT can do it far more quickly and cheaply (albeit less accurately, in too many cases).

Sadly, there are also plenty of brands stuck at the level of this more generic content because their experts are siloed from the marketing department, who are creating content with only a superficial understanding of what they're writing about.

To create truly rich, effective expertise-based content, you need to involve both subject matter experts and expert marketers from the offset.

Marketers, it's your job to become a prospector, mining your expert's brain for the most valuable seams of gold that you can then shape into content that serves your audience and the brand you're building. You'll need to set the strategy and push back when your experts stray from it. Remember, they're not the marketing authority, you are. More on this in part 03.

And subject matter experts, you need to make yourself available and you also need to respect the expertise your marketer has. You're creating content, not writing an academic paper or presenting to a handful of peers who are as interested as you are in every nuance of your subject. Your marketer is there to extract and shape the right aspects of your expertise so that it hits key marketing and business objectives.

In our experience, this truly collaborative relationship is hard to achieve - be prepared for the Storming stage of Tuckman's group development model⁴ - but if you can achieve it, you will have the potential to create content that allows your brand to shine out as an expert among your peers and competitors.

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Part 03: Involving experts in content creation

A guide for marketers (and their experts)

It would have been all too easy to end this guide after part 02. We've covered the strengths of an expertise-based positioning strategy, we've looked at what expertise actually is and how it's perceived, and we've started to tease out the elements of content strategy that apply specifically to expertise-based content.

But the reality is that when it comes to the execution stage, there are a number of challenges that we've seen our clients facing time and time again. And it links back to the point we made at the end of part 02, about collaboration.

If you're a marketer responsible for executing an expertise-based positioning strategy, you'll know how important it is to collaborate with the subject matter experts in your business to create expertise-based content. But how exactly do you go about doing that?

While you may be well versed in your industry - even a specialist - you're not the subject matter expert. The person or people with the deepest insights might be the founder or CEO, the CTO or Chief Science Officer, the product team or the consultants out in the field.

⁴ Tuckman, B (1965). *Developmental sequence in small groups*. Psychological Bulletin.

As we mentioned in part 02, content produced by marketers in isolation from subject matter experts is likely to feel insubstantial, no different from that created by businesses with no expertise full stop. To set your content apart and make your brand's reputation shine, you're going to need to work with your experts.

Easier said than done. Here are some of the challenges that you're likely to face, along with solutions you can use to ensure you get the most out of them.

Subject-matter experts, if you're reading, fantastic. You could do a lot worse than spend a few minutes understanding how to make your marketer's job easier and get better results for your business. Just try not to be offended if we veer a little too close to the truth for your liking.

Challenge 01: Your subject matter experts aren't marketers

Every content marketer dreams of finding a subject matter expert who is also a brilliant content creator. Few realise that dream. It's rare that a leading data scientist or pioneering microbiologist or highly qualified leadership consultant is also a talented and experienced marketer.

Chances are, if left to their own devices, your subject matter experts will pitch their writing at the wrong level for your audience. They will almost certainly use the wrong tone of voice - especially if they come from an academic background. And it probably won't be strategically informed.

Solution:

This is where you bring together their expertise and yours. Even if you're lucky and your experts are fairly decent writers, you'll still need to create the content strategy, set the topic areas, write decent briefs, make sure there are thorough brand voice guidelines available, and probably do a lot of editing.

But that may not be enough. If your experts aren't likely to be able to craft great content even with guidance, you'll need to think of them as gold mines. Your job is to dig until you find a rich seam and then extract as much gold as possible and use it to craft the content yourself.

Challenge 02: Your experts are very busy people

Even if you've landed yourself an expert who is adept at creating content, there's a good chance they'll be too busy to put pen to paper. At least not with the frequency and consistency you need to support a decent content strategy.

It could also be that they simply aren't all that interested, especially if they can't see the benefit of creating expert content. Which means even if they say yes, they'll find some reason why they couldn't deliver this month - sorry, too much going on with the latest sprint or patent application or fundraising round.

Solution:

Let's address the latter issue first. If your expert isn't convinced that content is important, you're going to need to sell the benefits and make your case. Remember, they're not the marketing expert, you are - it might be obvious to you that **expertise-based** content can have a significant impact on the business but not to them. Find out what it is they care most about - whether it's generating leads or getting speaking engagements - and appeal to that.

Then, once they're convinced, make it easy for them. Rather than bugging them every week, arrange a longer session once a month or even once a quarter to get the information you need for a content series.

And make sure that you do your research so that rather than asking them the basic questions - the stuff you could find out with a bit of research - you can ask them for those insights that only they as experts can bring: the anecdotes, the opinions, the nuance.

Challenge 03: They just have too much expertise and knowledge

Experts, by their very nature, hold a lot of information in their heads. They may be good at accessing that information, but they're probably less adept at sifting through it and working out which bits are relevant to the given piece of content you're creating. Being passionately interested in their subjects, they may well go into far too much detail.

Solution:

Imagine that information is a tangle of yarn. In that state, it isn't inherently useful unless you're a passionate collector of yarn. In order for it to be useful, it needs to be untangled, and the right strands knitted together according to a pattern to form that jumper, or a scarf or a hat. Ditto information.

As a marketer responsible for creating content based around subject matter expertise, you need to get good at extracting the right information from your experts - the untangling and selecting process - as well as using it to create the content itself. So you'll need to learn to ask the right questions and guide the conversation so it stays on the right track, pushing back when your expert veers off track.

It might also be helpful to create a brief for your experts to consider in advance so they feel prepared. This is especially important if your expert is prone to rambling or if they're the kind of person who likes to ponder a question for a few minutes - or hours - before giving their answer.

You'll know - or get to know - your own experts and what you need to do to get the best out of them.

Challenge 04: They don't know how expert they are

If challenge 03 is about your expert sharing too much detail, this one is the opposite. Experts often sit at the last of the four stages of competence - unconscious competence. That's when you're so good at something, or so knowledgeable about something, that you don't realise how much others don't know.

This can lead to two different problems. In the context of creating content, your expert may not drill down into a subject in enough detail because they assume you - or your brand's audience - understand their jumping in point. Or they might completely miss the most interesting and relevant points full stop because again, to them it's ordinary even though you know that your audience would be fascinated.

Solution:

Again, your job here is to help your experts to a) identify what's interesting to their audience and b) pitch it at the right level.

In our briefing sessions at RH&Co we often help experts to come up with analogies to make whatever it is they're talking about more understandable to the brand's audience. As an example, we work with a company that's in embedded finance and one of their experts was talking about the difficulty of performing KYC (Know Your Customer) checks to protect against financial crime. The analogy we helped them come up with was:

"It's the equivalent of taking a utility bill to the bank to prove identification. Except in this case, the bills aren't yours and you might not know how to find the people who have them."

You can see how that instantly makes a subject a lot more tangible and relatable.

The 4 stages of competence

Stage 01: Unconscious incompetence - you don't know what you don't know

Stage 02: Conscious incompetence - you realise you know nothing

Stage 03: Conscious competence - you're aware that you're improving

Stage 04: Unconscious competence - you're so good you don't even realise it

Challenge 05: They just don't respect your position

This one might sound a little harsh but we've heard it from enough marketers to know that it's true, even if it's not meant as badly as it sounds when you write it down in black and white. It's just so much easier to cancel an internal meeting than an external one, or push team based tasks down the to-do list because a request related to a client project feels more urgent.

Solution:

In the same way that kids will often ignore their parents but listen as soon as a visitor has something to say, we've found that experts usually pay better attention to us as outsiders than they do to their own people.

Another benefit of being an outsider is that we can push back without fear of internal politics. We've often stayed on a briefing call with a marketer after the subject matter expert has left and heard them marvel at how much we've managed to extract. They may have been asking the same questions for weeks and not getting anywhere. It's annoying but it's just the way it is with some experts.

Get started with expertise-based content

How to find the support you need

If you're considering bringing in support to help you extract the right information from your subject matter experts and use it to create genuinely useful, authority-building content, you might be wondering what the next step is.

Think about whether you need help with:

- Defining the expertise in your business and translating it into a brand messaging
- Exploring and defining core themes to create a business focused content strategy
- Working with your subject matter experts to develop content around key pillars

If you'd like to speak to one of the RH&Co team about our consultancy, content creation and training services, get in touch today for a chat.

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Rin Hamburgh is a journalist turned copywriter and founder of Bristol-based strategic brand copywriting agency RH&Co. Her career has been built on a foundation of finding and interviewing experts for features in publications from The Guardian to Psychologies magazine.

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