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## **Online Marketing Blog from TopRank® - Where Search Fits in the Digital Marketing Mix – 12 Lessons from Lee Odden Keynote at MnSummit**

### **In This Issue...**

- [Where Search Fits in the Digital Marketing Mix – 12 Lessons from Lee Odden Keynote at MnSummit](#)
- [More Recent Articles](#)
- [Search Online Marketing Blog from TopRank®](#)



I am one of the last generations that will be able to remember what it's like to not have technology in school.

We didn't text. We passed notes. Our really crappy handwriting scrawled across lined paper that was folded so small we were convinced the teacher couldn't see it as we threw or passed it back and forth. Rumors, quizzes, and small talk would whiz around the room until class was done. Then, the written conversation was over until tomorrow.

If we wanted to research something we did one of three things: asked someone else or begged our parents to tell us so we wouldn't have to do option number three—look it up in the dictionary or the library.

Today's generation will never know what that's like. Texting means they will never experience the overwhelming terror that washes over you when the teacher threatens to read your note *out loud* to the entire classroom. They will never understand the frustration of trying to look up a word they don't know how to spell. Faced with a choice between a library and Google, let's face it, Google is way easier.

Libraries aren't the only organizations feeling the impact from our increasing preferences for online information. A study by Accenture Interactive recently reported that digital marketing is predicted to account for 75% of CMOs budgets over the next five years. And yet 79% of them don't believe their businesses will be ready.

Stop and think about that for a minute. An overwhelming majority of C-level

executives don't think their business will be ready for the vast majority of their marketing to be digital, meeting the information consumption habits of their consumers. How on earth do they expect to attract and engage them?



At the inaugural Minnesota Search Summit in Minneapolis, our CEO Lee Odden gave the opening keynote to an audience of search marketers offering advice to that 79% on how to break free of SEO and SEM silos and approach digital marketing strategically. Here are 12 lessons from that presentation outlining the transformation TopRank Marketing has made from search to digital marketing agency and how to develop an approach that optimizes for customers vs. search engines.

### **1. Strive to Continually Learn**

One of the first things Lee said about how he evolved his thinking from Search to Digital Marketing was, "I'm eternally curious, and I am an eternal student." He advised the audience to set objectives and goals to learn something new every single day. And what better way to learn than to connect with people? Talk to those who are solving similar or different problems than you, attend lectures, read forums—whatever it takes to consume as much information as you can. The more you consume, the more you can leverage.

### **2. Focus on People, Not Bots**

For some SEOs it can be easy to focus on search engine bots—it's really easy to know what they want. Make sure your keyword use is good, pages load quickly, attract high quality links, and they'll be relatively happy. But bots don't pay your bills. They don't purchase your product (yet). People do. Digital marketers have to shift perspective to be more customer centric—

focusing more on optimizing for customer experiences than for search engine bots.

“Rather than just thinking about the most popular keywords somebody might be looking for at the end of the buying cycle and creating content for the 50 derivatives of that keyword, think about what the other paths might be,” Lee advised. “Consumer’s don’t all search and convert. They may research multiple sources before committing to a purchase.”

Create personalized content. Take the hub of your hub-and-spoke model, and make derivative versions of it for different channels to expand visibility of your company in the places where your customers are. Give people information in formats they prefer, and everywhere they go.

Coordinating visibility in organic search, paid search, organic and paid social media, industry publications, via email and even offline, you then start to create a congruent experience that can help them towards a conversion.

### **3. Be The Best Answer to Customer Questions & Queries**

So what kind of content should you create? Answers. Helpful, actionable answers.

Your customers, and potential customers, are asking questions. Sometimes they’re to your sales team, other times they’re in the form of a search query—but they *are* being asked. Create content to help them. Check the internal searches conducted on your website to see what your visitors want more of (or are struggling to find). Survey current customers to find out how they’re searching, what types of information they prefer, and where they’re looking. Analyze forms that are being filled out. Whatever it takes to understand what your audience is looking for.

Then, create content that answers those questions. Each time your company solves an information problem for a prospect or customer, you help lead them to the next step closer to purchase or even advocacy.

### **4. Put Yourself in Your Customer’s Shoes...Or at Least Understand Their Journey**

The buying journey is different for customers based on what they care about and their preferences for finding, consuming and acting on information. Not everyone searches the same way, uses the same social networks, or values the same topics or formats of online media. Some will start with search, others will take to social to ask a trusted following. Identifying and understanding the different journeys your customers are taking is essential for successful digital marketing.

Once you know how your customers discover information on the web, the content formats they prefer and what will inspire them to take action, you can create a content road map to identify the questions people have at each stage of their journey. Then architect a content plan that addresses those questions/concerns. Essentially, you're creating a plan that allows you to be there for them every step of the way – to be the best answer, wherever customers are looking.

## **5. Develop Dynamic Personas**

Lee recommended that regardless of which tool or strategy marketers use to create personas, they focus on making them dynamic. "The web is dynamic and so are consumer behaviors, you don't just create [personas] and say 'ok that's it we're going to create content for that for the next year'. You have to keep coming back and seeing how things are changing because seasonality, pop culture and fundamental changes about a audience segment can happen."

## **6. Think of Search and Social as Being Hand-in-Hand**

"Social is a remarkable discovery channel, search is a powerful validation channel," Lee told the keynote audience. Using an example of asking his social following where he should take his ten year old (at the time) son in New York, he showed how a social query turns into a search query when users want more information. "Someone can tell you to go to this restaurant on social, and most people won't run right out and go there. They'll want to know more information like price, location, hours and go to a search engine to find out."

It's essential to digital marketing efforts to not see search and social as silos, but as two channels that reinforce and augment the other. Viewing content discovery and consumption from the buyer's point of view helps marketers create and promote the kind of content that will best inspire them to take action – interact, share or buy.

## **7. Then Think of Digital Marketing like a Subway Map**

Even though search and social play huge roles in digital marketing, they're definitely not the only players in the game. Gartner recently published an image that showed how digital marketing was like a subway map. Dozens of different activities—from crowdsourcing, analytics, and search retargeting to mobile messaging/commerce, email marketing, and advertising—weave together to create a complicated network that achieves an overall goal.

Don't become so focused on one or two elements of digital marketing (like

SEO and PPC) that you forget the rest. We need all of the elements to get us where we're going, just like a subway needs all of those stations and streets.

## 8. Hone your Digital Marketing Skills

Lee identified [5 key digital marketing skills](#) and elements that are key for search marketers:

- **Segmentation**—Research audience and customer data to construct segments. Drawing from demographic, psychographic and behavioral data sources, find common characteristics of customers to create profiles that describe who your customers are. Developing personas from that segmentation exercise will help content creators develop meaningful content based on what customer goals, pain points and preferences are. Potential customers will crave different information than existing customers.
- **Buy Cycle Stories**—Storytelling is powerful and developing stories for your digital marketing content requires you to know who your customers are. Map the buying cycle in terms of the questions customers have, and figure out what kinds of messages/stories you can tell them at the different stages of the journey from awareness to purchase. Once you understand your customers and the questions they have, you can best optimize for keywords.
- **Content Planning, Creation, Curation**—These are the mechanics around content marketing and account for the ability to plan meaningful content across channels based on the problems a product or service can solve for specific customers. From content organization to sourcing—whether that be from within your company, industry experts, or customers themselves.
- **Amplification**— As Lee likes to say, “Great content isn’t great until people find and consume it”. The ability to promote content effectively, whether it’s social sharing, search and social ads, email, publicity or simply tapping into your own networks – is essential for successful digital marketing.
- **Measurement & Optimization**— Identify Key Performance Indicators, measurement and analytics appropriate to the goals, audience and marketing tactics you’ll be using. It’s both the strategic value of setting goals and seeing if you’ve met them as well as the day to day of marketing performance optimization. Check to see if you really reached your audience. Did they bounce? Did they convert? Analyzing their actions can help you create a better, more targeted piece of content the next time around.

## 9. Know How Your Content Contributes to a Conversion

Look at everything leading up to the conversation as an assist. Interactions with content like ebooks, SlideShare, social network updates, blog posts, articles...they're capable being an assist to a conversion. Not everything that you're publishing will universally be a conversion or an assist—it will depend on the person that finds, consumes and acts on the content.

Calculate a percentage of contribution to the overall conversion. That way, you can identify the value of the content you're creating, and determine the contribution to leads, sales and revenue.

For a great list of content marketing case studies that include revenue performance, [check out this post](#).

## **10. Overcome Analysis Paralysis and Learn from the Data You're Collecting**

Some of Lee's favorite ways to learn more about consumers other than talking to them directly include:

- Gated content and open forms allow people to express what they're interested in. that's a great opportunity. The text field of an inquiry form overlaid over time will start to expose trends. Then you can get an idea of what people are concerned about
- Logged queries from a website's internal search engine
- Panel data from third party providers like Quantcast or Rocket Fuel
- Any platform that sells advertising will usually give demographic information. Look at the quantity and interactions from that data and overlay it with the demographic information to get a deeper level of insight

It's a combination of those things, but ultimately talking to your customers is the most insightful and beneficial from a digital marketing standpoint.

## **11. Think like a Scientist: Create a Hypothesis and Experiment**

One thing Lee heavily advocates for is experimentation. He recommended that marketers find ways to experiment using resources they have, such as their own social networks and blogs. Play with length, messaging, tone, structure, offers...the list is endless. Analyze those real world reactions and bring the insight into your marketing recommendations.

## **12. Takeaways for Search Marketers to Become Better Digital Marketers: Optimize!**

- **Optimize for buyers** by focusing on being the best answer wherever

- customers are looking.
- **Optimize customer experiences** through search marketing and connecting with buyers on an emotional level.
- **Optimize your expertise** by developing strategic digital marketing skills now.

Search isn't dead. SEO isn't dead. And content marketing certainly isn't dead. It's the silos between them that need to fade away towards a more integrated approach to digital marketing. This was the key message from Lee's presentation and what we aspire to in our work at [TopRank Online Marketing](#).

Understanding what's important about your customers—from who they are and what their titles are, to where they're searching and what they're searching for—can help you map out buyer journeys so you can create meaningful content that's easy to find and share. Search, social, and content play huge roles in the optimization of buyer experiences, and can help build a solid foundation for the rest of your digital marketing efforts.

Believe it or not, these 12 lessons are just a slice of what Lee presented at the MnSearch Summit. Here is the full presentation on Slideshare: "Where Does Search Marketing Fit in the Digital Marketing Mix?"

How do you try to excel at digital marketing?



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