

BRANDED

Fresh Thinking About
Branding and Marketing



Unlocking the C-Suite

Why Content Is Key

DeSantis
Breindel

They are the holy grail of B2B marketing: C-suite executives who open the doors, make the decisions and write the checks. And they are increasingly difficult to reach through conventional marketing channels.

C-suite executives are tuning out traditional marketing messages.

C-suiters hold the keys to the kingdom for many B2B marketers—and therein lies the problem: everyone wants their business. Professional services firms, enterprise software companies, advertising and marketing agencies, investment banks and asset managers—these are just some of the organizations vying for the attention of the C-suite. And many are having trouble getting through.

Part of the problem is that C-suite executives are like the rest of us. Increasingly, they're tuning out traditional marketing messages. They skip television commercials using a DVR and don't click online ads. They're so bombarded by messaging—at home, at the office, in fact, anywhere they go with their smartphones—that they're just not listening anymore. But C-suiters also have unique qualities that make them tough targets for marketing. For one thing, they're protected by gatekeepers. Fortune 500 CEOs typically employ a phalanx of assistants dedicated to filtering out unwanted phone calls, visitors, emails and publications. They're also scheduled down to the nanosecond, with little free time to consider whatever it is you're offering.

So the C-suite can be tough to reach. But it isn't an impregnable fortress. The key to getting inside is providing executives with something they need but can't get elsewhere: relevant content.

Tell Me Something I Don't Know

Even at the highest ranks of a corporation, the need for information is acute. "The New Path to the C-Suite," a recent *Harvard Business Review* article by Boris Groysberg of Harvard Business School and L. Kevin Kelly and Bryan MacDonald of Heidrick & Struggles, noted that C-level roles are evolving: "...the skills that help you climb to the top won't suffice once you get there." In other words, C-level executives must continue to grow even at the pinnacle of their careers.

"Selling to the C-Suite" (McGraw Hill, 2010) by Nicholas A.C. Read and Dr. Stephen J. Bistriz is based on data collected from interviews with 527 executives. The authors found that executives want to be contacted because they thrive on "fresh ideas from outside their companies." The key word here is fresh. No one, least of all top executives, wants stale marketing messages or warmed-over information. As one CIO told the authors, sales representatives calling on him "better be prepared to tell him things he can't get from his own people."

Today, content is the creative that turns the heads of C-suite executives.

It used to be said of the online world that "content is king." It wasn't about the speed of your internet connection or the capacity of your servers. It was the content you delivered

that mattered. Today, we might amend the line to read “Content is the new creative.” Until recently, flashy design and clever headlines were sufficient to grab attention. Today, content creates awareness. White papers, webinars, blog posts, newsletters—these are the new “creative” that turn the heads of C-suite executives.

Content That Gets Attention

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What type of content works best? In our marketing work for B2B companies, our research has too often uncovered a disconnect between what a company thinks its content is accomplishing and what its targets think. C-suite executives frequently tell us that they don’t receive content from our clients—even though we know they are regularly contacted with emailed newsletters and white papers. Other executives report that they are aware of receiving content, but it’s not content that they need. Still others indicate that the content they are getting is not credible because of its source.

A successful content strategy must therefore accomplish three critical objectives. First, it needs to get noticed. This requires understanding how and where your C-suite audience acquires information. Will they log onto a webinar? Attend a seminar? Do they prefer to receive white papers online or in printed format?

Second, C-suite content must answer your target’s information needs. Again, research will uncover what keeps them up at night, the knowledge gaps they struggle with, and what other information sources they currently consult.

Finally, C-suite content must be credible. Achieving credibility requires taking a close, hard look at your organization and asking: What do we know that no one else knows? In what areas can we credibly be considered thought leaders? One strategy for increasing the likelihood that your content will be perceived as credible is making it proprietary: surveys and other primary research can establish credibility even in areas in which you may not already be perceived as an authority.

Finding Your Content Niche

One organization that gets this right is a client of ours, one of the nation’s largest accounting and advisory firms. This firm deploys content marketing to reach its core decision-making audience: CEOs and CFOs. “We provide a service based on knowledge and expertise,” observes the client’s director of communications. “You can’t go to market without a strategy based on content.”

The firm is quite scientific about its content marketing. Its brand is built around its ability and willingness to offer clients advice and expertise they can put to work in protecting and building their businesses. Content supports this brand by providing practical information that a C-suite

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executive can use to make strategic business decisions. While the firm regularly issues updates to keep clients and prospects informed about late-breaking legislative and regulatory changes, it recognizes that virtually every sizeable accounting firm is doing the same thing. So it has invested in developing proprietary content based on surveys to give it an edge. It has even branded this research-based content; a canny approach to building awareness.

Significantly, the research is focused on areas in which the firm has deep market penetration and broad credibility, such as hedge funds and private equity. The director of communications notes that his firm's content strategy has led to interviews in key industry trade publications and invitations to speak at conferences. "C-suite executives aren't hard to reach," he observes, "but it is hard to get their attention. For us, content is one important channel to get attention. But we are always aware that our reputation is on the line with everything we publish. We know that it has to be targeted to what our audience is truly interested in."

The C-suite is hungry for information, and if you can provide it in a compelling and credible fashion, you'll have a much better chance of putting your product or service in front of this critical but elusive audience. Content will never replace traditional marketing channels, but it will play an increasingly important role in any synchronized C-suite marketing program.

About DeSantis Breindel



DeSantis Breindel is a B2B branding and marketing firm based in New York. At critical inflection points, we work with our clients to align brand and marketing strategy with business strategy—creating stories and experiences to engage customers, influence prospects, rally employees, inspire investors and build communities. To learn more, go to www.desantisbreindel.com

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