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How Think Tanks Can Fill the "Content Void"

Serving sustainability and the public interest

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In a multi-channel media environment where the ability to grab attention drives dollars, content is wealth. Think tanks create a tremendous volume of high-value content. But are they using it to maximize both their own wealth and the public interest?

Introduction

Partisanship, rumor and sensationalism proliferate in today's confusing news landscape – and yet the continuing need for facts and rigorous analysis cannot be understated. At the risk of sounding too much like a Mainstream Media ad, we really do require trusted analysis on the big issues facing our world, now more than ever. Sadly, many news organizations are struggling to meet this demand. The threat of losing the 4th estate from the financial crisis was real, and ad revenue for traditional media will most likely never again reach 20th century heights.

However unfortunate, these struggles have opened up a big opportunity for think tanks and policy research organizations to step up and fill this void. Like media institutions, think tanks serve the public interest through high quality, fact-based analysis. At their best, they offer practical answers on the big political, economic and scientific issues confronting our world. Some have specific points of view on core topics and, like media organizations, they are not immune to influence from businesses and donors. But the most credible think tanks genuinely strive for transparency, make their funding sources known to the public, and let data and evidence lead them to potential solutions that improve outcomes for citizens.

How can non-partisan think tanks use these strengths to play an even bigger role in enriching our public debate (while bolstering their own sustainability)? Needless to say, compelling content is paramount. But that is just part of the story. At Parsons TKO, we have seen that think tanks benefit by making use of three strategies that further deepen their impact and relevance. First, savvy think tanks strategically aggregate and curate online content from other organizations (e.g. universities, NGOs, news outlets), in order to establish themselves as "one-stop shops" for trusted information on key topics. Second, think tanks consider strategic content partnerships with media organizations to strengthen their brand while reaching new audiences. Finally, they use technology that make their online content vastly easier for key stakeholders to access and share.

Aggregating and Curating Content from Outside Organizations

Most often, in crowded policy debates, a think tank's voice competes with a cacophony of others for attention and influence. Theirs may be a uniquely important and informed voice, but it's easy for it to get lost. This happens despite, in many cases, think tanks having the authority and expertise of positioning themselves as the "go-to" source for information on the policy issues they live and breathe every day.

So, why don't more think tanks aspire to "own" their given topic space, rather than settling for contributing to it? An organization with this goal has to share not only their own content, but relevant threads from other organizations, so that audiences can expect to come to them and get the full perspective. This prospect is intimidating, will your brand get watered down or will you simply become a platform for a competitors content? Despite these valid concerns, focus on truly becoming the go-to resource on a topic, including content curation of all the content on a topic, provides the best potential for a strong return on investment.

If you can stand by the strategy, or even pick just one area to pilot such an approach there are simple tactics that even resource-strapped organizations can implement to position themselves intelligently in the marketplace of ideas.

Aggregation

Aggregation is the simplest way to collect and share policy information from multiple sources. Choose trusted sources of analysis and evidence (e.g. news outlets, partner organizations, expert bloggers, etc.), and share links on your website to information that they publish on your chosen topic(s). This is a means of increasing the breadth of your online coverage with relatively low effort.

The U.S. Institute of Peace's Iran Primer project offers an example of this approach. It aspires to be "the world's most comprehensive website on Iran" by identifying and publishing relevant content from 50 of the world's top scholars on Iran. These experts represent diverse think tanks, universities, and other sources, and share viewpoints across different sides of the political debate. USIP exercises minimal control over the content featured on this section of its website, beyond identifying the scholars to be included, and providing a forum for their diverse perspectives.

Your organization can take a similar (if somewhat less comprehensive) approach by listing the trusted information sources referenced by your staff when they seek to deepen their knowledge in their particular area of expertise. In effect, this is a way of telling readers: “Our staff look to these places when they want to learn more – you might want to check them out too.” By letting audiences compare and contrast multiple perspectives, it makes it easier for them to learn about your topic, with you providing value as the comprehensive source. If your organization doesn’t yet have something like this for its own employees, you can start by formalizing this resource list, then sharing it publicly after it has been fine-tuned over a period of weeks or months.

Curation

Curation is a related concept, but involves a greater degree of editorial engagement and control on the part of your staff. Instead of simply aggregating a list of resources, your organization actively and consistently decides which specific articles should be featured. Along the way it adds relevant context, commentary and references to your think tank’s work. By doing this, you let your audience know which published works are significant, why they are important, and how they ought to influence the policy debate.

The president of The Atlantic Council, Fred Kempe does this effectively in a weekly newsletter he writes for key stakeholders. In it, he focuses on one specific policy topic per week, weaving in links to fresh news from external sources while sharing his own informed perspective. It’s a useful approach that demonstrates that his organization’s finger is on the pulse of the policy dialogue and provides immediate value to his list of followers in providing his research and perspective.

Establishing Content Partnerships with Media Outlets

One step beyond aggregation and curation: the founding of formal content partnerships with like-minded organizations. Some think tanks already do this on a small scale with other non-profits. However, we see a major opportunity for policy research organizations to ally formally and more proactively with news outlets in order to contextualize complex social, environmental and economic issues for their audiences.

Why don't more universities, think tanks and international NGOs already do this? Brand identity is one concern. Understandably, policy organizations value their independence, and don't necessarily want to dilute the integrity of their brand by tying it to a media organization. However, all think tanks already push hard to appear in the press, fighting for favorable coverage with minimal control over how their work is interpreted and communicated by journalists. A mutually beneficial content partnership makes it much easier for a think tank to share and distribute quality content, while identifying and negotiating conditions that mitigate brand risks and best serve its mission. For example, a syndication agreement gives your think tank editorial control over how research is presented and distributed by partners. When you have a piece worth sharing, a version with graphics can be pumped via an API (application program interface) to syndication partners to use as they see fit, giving proper credit and attribution. Also, when your organization shares editorial responsibilities with a media entity's journalists, the depth and accuracy of reporting is likely to improve rather than diminish (especially compared to the status quo).

Another reason why some think tanks may not think about content partnerships is that they would prefer that users interact directly with their think tank to gather information, rather than being "bypassed" through a third party news source. It's important to note here that audience engagement is not a zero sum game. Effective partnerships are designed to expand, rather than reduce, your organization's online audience (including the number of individuals it can potentially convert into donors and supporters). They enhance your organization's reputation and stature in the process. In a world filled with short-term thinking, it's a long-term play worth considering.

Which media outlets reach audiences you normally don't reach, and have a need for content like yours? Many smaller papers throughout the U.S. are already paying to syndicate international affairs or government policy reporting from groups like the AFP, AP and Thompson Reuters. In my years of working with think tanks in DC I have heard time and time again about the want to reach audiences beyond the Beltway, One way to do that could be creating a content partnership with news outlets in cities and regions looking to supplement coverage of government policy or international relations.

Another potential approach could be for your organization to flesh out a channel, blog or email newsletter with your brand and its content as the star, and the media outlet as the presenting platform. One example is Foreign Policy magazine's Peace Channel, a partnership with the Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. Through FP, the Belfer Center expands its reach to an international audience that shares its interest in research and ideas for a more peaceful world.

Well-negotiated content partnerships can bring other benefits too. The best-case scenario? Your organization can leverage its valuable content as a fresh revenue stream. Remember, many media outlets are eager to boost their coverage in important subject areas, availing themselves of expert knowledge without the expense of new employees. A partnership agreement also may include free promotion of your think tank's events and opportunities, either through proactive marketing campaigns or passive leveraging of unsold ad space across media platforms.

Also, keep in mind, not all partnerships need to run for years. The Aspen Institute, for instance, partnered with PBS NewsHour in 2017 to co-produce a special series of broadcast and digital stories that explored pressing health challenges. Short-term collaborations like this can be useful in testing the waters for longer-lasting alliances.

Making Existing Content Easier to Find, Read and Share

Even the best-written, most intelligent policy research can die on the vine when not plugged into an integrated system that allows people to easily find it, read it, and share it. If you want to grow the audience for your think tank's content, and increase their engagement with your work, strategic use of communications technology is essential.

In particular, we recommend making sure all your online content meets the following four criteria: it is (1) well indexed, (2) easily found by site users, (3) easily shared, and (4) portable (i.e. easy for other organizations to use for their own purposes). Sounds straightforward, right? Alas, in our experience, it is somewhat rare for organizations to be well situated in all four of these areas. Moreover, even think tanks that do well across the board can find new strategies that leverage their content in fresh ways.

When we work with policy research organizations as clients, our goal is to have them give us an enthusiastic "Yes!" to the following questions:

1. Is your content indexable?

Good writing is useful for getting users to engage with your team's work. But it's not sufficient – at least if you want your web content to be picked up by search engine crawlers. Think tank executives typically fixate on external search indexing (i.e. Google). But before looking outward, we strongly recommend organizations get their internal house in order – in particular, by focusing on how content is indexed by their Content Management System (CMS), and how in-house communications teams make use of this CMS.

Does your system allow editors to add comprehensive metadata for each piece of content on your site? If not, you should probably upgrade your CMS. Yet even if your current system does have lots of metadata fields, it's likely that there is room to improve how it is being used; in our experience, too few organizations optimize the full power of metadata to make their web content indexable.

In particular, we recommend that your organization have an explicit metadata strategy that is consistently applied by every employee who enters content into your CMS. When your organization properly uses internal and externally facing data tags for each piece of content (e.g. themes/topics, authors, geography associations with related content), it opens the door to many useful things. It enables your think tank to more effectively aggregate content by theme. It improves the accuracy and utility of your site's internal search function. It also improves your SEO results.

Looking a step ahead, smart data tags allow your CMS and internal search engine to take advantage of machine learning capabilities. For example, your organization can target relevant content recommendations to site users who enjoyed a related piece of content (much like Amazon and the New York Times do with product and story recommendations). New uses of metadata will surely emerge too, voice search for example. For your organization to take advantage, it's critical not to overlook your CMS.

2. Is your content findable by users who stumble onto your website?

Consider this hypothetical: Quite unexpectedly, the President just issued an executive order on a topic at the heart of your think tank's mission. Your communications director wrote a tweet immediately afterward, linking to the perfect article to help people get perspective on the issue. A handful of thought leaders found it fascinating, and would love to see what else your organization has written on this topic. How easy is it for them to find relevant content without having to use your site's search function, or to call you?

Too often, we find think tanks structure their websites based on their own organizational structures and priorities, rather than the actual topics their audience cares about. Users can be forced into having to figure out the difference between initiatives, programs and projects that share similar names but not the content. This is a surefire way to lose audience members. Fundraising priorities and organizational politics factor into decisions about site structure, sometimes for good reason – but would anyone at your organization be upset if the site brought in more traffic and drove more engagement, on a more consistent basis?

It is important for everyone at the organization (not just an outside consultant) to know the answer to a deceptively simple question. Why does your audience come to your site? What do they care about most? Look closely at your analytics for clues. It will allow you to educate staff on the need for a potential shift to make your site's navigation and structure more intuitive.

3. Is your content portable?

In most cases, you want work to be easily picked up and referenced by media organizations and content experts – ideally with as light a lift as possible from your (already overstretched) communications team. Designing for portability is key to achieving this dream.

If your organization doesn't have an API (or Application Programming Interface), you may want to consider working with developers to create one. An API is a way for two computer applications to talk to each other in a common language they both understand. In practical terms, it is a system that makes it easy for interested organizations to access your research in a predictable, flexible and powerful way. APIs require an initial resource investment, but have paid back dividends for many organizations by increasing the rate at which external groups adapt and share their research with new stakeholders. You get to control the specific content you share in an API, the data elements that travel with your content (e.g. headers, authors), and the organizations that are allowed to receive it (i.e. specific partners vs. the general public). In all cases, it's important to attach your organization's name and aesthetics to content in order to build your brand and ensure your information is properly referenced.

The benefits of an API also flow in the opposite direction. If your organization wants to position its website (or mobile application) as the leading source for policy research on its pet topic, an API can help you gather relevant content from other established players and feature it on your site seamlessly.

On the topic of portability, it is also essential to ask a more fundamental question: is it easy for your online content to be consumed on multiple devices (e.g. web, app, smart phone, tablet, etc.). Perhaps it's embarrassing to broach this topic in 2019, but we remain surprised by how many policy organizations still do not have mobile-responsive websites. If yours is among them, a site redesign probably ought to be a burning priority, as Google's algorithms de-prioritize sites without responsive or mobile-friendly design, making such content out of reach for all but the most already-informed users.

4. Is your content shareable?

If you are not taking advantage of network effects, you are not using the "net" for what it does best. The goal: make content as quick and easy as possible for people to share with their personal networks. At this stage most national media organizations already do this well (if only because they have to – many of them live and die based on the size of their audiences). Your organization should emulate these news sites.

Don't underestimate the benefits that your stakeholders get from sharing relevant content with peers or colleagues. By making your content shareable, you make it simple for fans to affiliate with your brand – and show their peers and colleagues that they are smart and informed. It can mark the start of that magic elixir -- brand allegiance – that builds your reputation, increases donations and expands your impact.

The ideas presented depend on alignment of strategic vision of your organizational content and theory of change, the technical and design elements are secondary to this alignment. None of these approaches require all or nothing efforts, you can select various approaches to build, test and analyze.

About ParsonsTKO

ParsonsTKO is dedicated to helping mission-driven organizations get the most out of their investments in marketing and technology through business process improvements, consultation, and data analysis. Our focus on engagement architecture helps organizations plan for technical evolution, execute content strategy, and measure engagement performance and impact with target audiences.

Collaboration, trust, and diversity of ideas are the foundational values that have guided our company since 2013. We believe these values, applied internally for our team as well as with our clients, will always result in right-fit solutions. Change is not comfortable, but is inevitable. Innovation is not easy, but it is absolutely necessary. We pride ourselves on finding approaches that challenge the status quo, bringing forward only the best of the way things are to help our clients become what they need to be to succeed.

About the author

Tony Kopetchny is the CEO and co-founder of ParsonsTKO. He currently resides in Washington, DC with his wife, daughter and two pups Rocky and Apollo. Tony has worked in the Communications and media creation space since ‘98 when film was still film.

He has worked in and consulted to the non-profit and think-tank community for over 15 years and has built and run large scale digital strategies and websites for organizations such as FEMA, DHS, the Open Societies Foundation, Brookings, The Pew Charitable Trusts, the Woodrow Wilson Center and the Associated Press.

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