



INSIGHTS & COMMENTARY ON
*Relationship Building
within the International
Lawyers Network*

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Combating the Zombification of Legal Content Marketing with Breakthrough Storytelling

BY LINDSAY GRIFFITHS ON JANUARY 10, 2017



17 million people watched the October 23rd premiere of the 7th season of The Walking Dead.

Although the show is wildly popular because of its writing and its character development, it's safe to say that it's also a huge hit because, well, zombies.

Zombies may not be the biggest threat facing our friends on TWD at the moment, but it turns out that zombie-thinking IS the biggest threat facing our content marketing efforts in the legal industry.

That might sound extremely dire, but hear me out – as we look at the saturation point we're reaching with content (both in and outside the legal industry) and we look at the lack of care a lot of us are giving to the

Combatting the Zombification of Legal Content Marketing with Breakthrough Storytelling - Zen and the Art of Legal Networking
details over the tools and the shiny new thing, we're just blindly producing more and more and more and more, adding more noise (as [Adrian Lurssen](#) would say).

I read [an excellent piece](#) this afternoon from The Content Strategist, looking at the zombification of the content marketing industry in general, and the three traits we'll need in 2017 in order to be successful. I know many lawyers (and even marketing professionals) who will read that and think "well, that doesn't apply to me, since we're in a specialized profession, not the *content marketing industry*." But I promise you, it very much DOES apply in our industry, and I'll explain how.

Shane Snow, who wrote the above-mentioned piece says:

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Millions of smart marketers have been infected by the content bug. They've bought into the idea that stories and customer education build relationships in ways that commercial sales pitches and calls-to-action do not. While this realization is a good thing, many brands have started drifting asleep and flooding the internet with the same generic zombie content as everyone else.”

Does this sound familiar? Replace “brands” with “lawyers” or “law firms” and it might sink in. Content is NOT a bad thing. But content for content's sake doesn't build the relationships that you want. Snow says that a lot of great storytelling exists in the business world – and this is true for law firms too. There are absolutely a few beacons of light in the legal industry who understand content marketing and how to be the signal among the noise. This isn't for them.

But Snow addresses two forces that are creating what he calls this zombification “crisis” – and these factors exist in the legal industry as well.

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First, the content marketing industry is starting to get saturated. It's like when technology made it so any of us could record our own music and publish it for free online. Before long, an insane amount of music had flooded the internet, most of it bad or boring. (I'd include a link to my own band's old Myspace page if it wasn't so embarrassing.) After a while, it became hard to find a good new artist among the Myspace zombies.”

If it's hard to draw parallels between music and legal, let's look at what Adrian Lurssen had to say in a piece he shared yesterday (which he originally penned in November of 2015):

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Websites and blogs have greatly lowered the cost and effort of *publishing*, but that does not make you a *publisher* (someone who identifies, cultivates, engages, and grows an audience of readers).”

More on that later...But you get the idea. The tools exist, so we create content with the tools, simply because they exist. But the content creation in itself doesn't make us successful at it – just because I have a camera doesn't mean I'm a good photographer. Just because I have a set of paints and brushes doesn't make me a good painter. Just because I have a blog platform doesn't make me a good blogger.

The second force?

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Second, vendors that aren't that good at content are selling zombie pods. Agencies that specialize in traditional tactics are just throwing the word 'content' in their same old offerings. 'Me too' tech vendors are pitching end-

to-end solutions that promise brands the world but fail to help them create content worth watching or reading.

Publishers are leveraging their editorial reputation to launch content studios, but the content often falls short.

The result: branded content that looks like it might be worth consuming but is ultimately just an empty shell.”

That’s a lot of marketing-speak to basically say that because EVERYONE has access to the same publishing tools (yay!), ANYONE can create content and make it look like something worth consuming, whether or not it’s actually valuable. That includes packaged ghost-written content that is sold to several law firms and branded with their firm name (it happens), creating “blog” posts that are republished tweets, strings of keywords sewn together to create something entirely useless, etc. Because there’s so much out there that is useless, many people will just give up on finding what is actually relevant and useful.

So what’s to be done? Snow has three tactics that he recommends (which fall right in line with a lot of what Lurssen says, based on his experience on what he sees working through JD Supra) for success in using content. Because there’s much to be said about each of these, we’ll look at the first one today, and leave the others for future posts.

Breakthrough Storytelling

This may sound like something that should be more under the purview of *consumer* marketers, but no matter what you’re selling – services or goods – you’re still selling to people. And in the legal industry, you’re forming relationships and building trust. Word of mouth marketing, which is how you’ve developed business to this point, is actually about storytelling – you do good work for a client, and that client tells that story to someone else, who then hires you to do good work for them. Right?

So all we’re talking about here is communicating those stories and others in similar veins through content marketing.

What is meant by breakthrough storytelling? Snow guides us through the early days of Edison's kinetoscope, when everyone was so enamored by the invention, and the possibility to see moving pictures on a screen, that they were willing to dress up, find babysitters, and pay money for tickets...all to watch people shovel garbage for five minutes.

The first movie was literal trash.

And people ate it up.

Why? Because of the novelty of the technology. Nothing much has changed today, with the next new shiny thing. In the early days of Twitter, we sat online and talked about how cool Twitter was (I know, I know), and today there are snaps about Snapchat. There's nothing wrong with experimenting with new technology because you enjoy it, but in order to use it as a strategy, you want to make sure there is some actual *strategy* behind it (more on that in a future post).

This is where breakthrough storytelling comes in. The movie industry eventually reached a point of saturation, where SO much was being produced, but not a lot that was truly good was emerging. Snow tells us:

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In the first decade of the 20th century, the U.S. film industry produced 23 films. In the next decade, it produced over 4,000. In the 1920s, over 7,000 films were made.

However, after the apex of the twenties, the number of films made each decade dropped sharply. By the 1960s, only a couple hundred movies were coming out each year. That's because garbage isn't really that interesting unless it's new. After a while, people stopped watching average movies, so fewer investors backed them.”

"*Garbage isn't really that interesting unless it's new.*" We're hitting that point not only in content marketing in general, but also in *legal* content marketing. Lurssen tells us more in his piece:

“

Every two days we create as much information as we did from the dawn of civilization until 2003. (That per Eric Schmidt, five years ago when he was Google's CEO—and one can only imagine what the numbers look like today.) The point: your readers are inundated by information—entertaining, useful, necessary, gratuitous—from all quarters, all day, every day. You don't have much real estate, nor time, to earn and keep their attention. This requires paying attention to the details.”

And...

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Another *signal v. noise* issue and put another way: you thought they'd read you because you are you. Those days are over, even with your clients. Today, professionals who take the time to understand who they are trying to reach—who profile timely reader concerns and needs—and then write in response to what they've learned ... *they* are the people who are being read.”

The legal industry isn't any more immune than the movie industry was. What did the movie industry do? They created the BLOCKBUSTER – movies like Star Wars and The Godfather. Snow points out that these are compelling stories that people *want* to watch.

In the legal industry, where are our blockbusters?

‘Think we don’t need them? We do. As Snow says:

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With every new way of communicating with an audience, the same pattern has emerged. We’re excited by the latest thing—radio, the web, Snapchat—so we pay attention, even if what’s on there is garbage. But eventually, we lose interest in content for content’s sake. Eventually, we need awesome content or we’ll find something else to do.”

That’s just as true in the legal industry as in any other industry, and we’re seeing it already. Look at the results of the [Digital & Content Marketing Survey](#) done among general counsel by Greentarget, showing a falling off of readership for law firm blogs starting last year. When we’re producing content for content’s sake, people find something else to do besides consume that content. So let’s be better.

More to the point, we don’t even need a TON of hits on our content, as long as we’re getting the right eyeballs on it. And that leads to the next two tactics from Snow...which we’ll cover in future posts. Stay tuned...

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