

Thought Leadership as a Buzzword: How to elevate your content strategy

Hosted by: Dani Hao, Marketing Coach and Consultant

Guest speaker: Brooklin Nash, B2B Content Marketer, Strategist and Consultant

Dani:

Hello everybody and welcome to another episode of Supercharge Marketing. Today, we have Brooklin Nash on the show. Brooklyn is a B2B content marketer with a focus on long-form thought leadership content for sales and marketing platforms. After 4 years of freelancing and 2 years in-house, he runs Nash Content Consulting along with his wife, Becca. They currently live in Antigua, Guatemala. Thank you so much, Brooklin, for coming on the show today.

Brooklin:

Thanks for asking me on, Dani.

Dani:

Of course, it's my pleasure. So you've really had a super illustrious, career working with some of the most recognizable brands in B2B. Can you share all of the hats you've worn in your career and also the brands that you've worked with?

Brooklin:

Yeah, I mean I've mostly kept on the content hat for the most part. For the first four years of my career, I was fully a freelance writer, I hadn't even gotten into full-fledged content marketing. And in those roles, I was doing everything from social media for small businesses, to sales pages and product prescriptions, before I got into B2B tech, and marketing and sales platforms specifically.

Brooklin:

So that kind of helped me get a broader sense of marketing content, beyond just this niche. More recently as I've kind of dove into B2B tech, I've doubled down on content marketing specifically and that's meant different things at different places, right? So I've only really had two full-time jobs - the rest of them are contracts and consulting and freelancing. With my first startup, I was the first marketing hire so I kind of handled all things content, whether it was what they had up on Intercom for the help desk, and Q&A and FAQ and all that, to the outbound emails they were sending, to the SEO articles.

Brooklin:

It was kind of a catch-all role because it was the only marketing role at the startup, right? And then I moved into Outreach and that was kind of the opposite. They had a very full-fledged marketing team and I was filling a very specific function. I was on community content so I got to work with their wider audience in kind of curating content, instead of coming up with it from scratch. So that was a really fun role to engage with the sales community and figure out what's most important to them and kind of get it straight from the horse's mouth instead of being a marketer sitting behind a desk, and then talking about sales topics and trying to sound like I

knew what I was talking about. I was able to work with actual salespeople on topics that might resonate, work with them on their writing - the points that they were making and all of that. So that's kind of been the gamut.

Dani:

Yeah, and that's honestly, really exciting because I think a lot of content marketers tend to be in a little bit of a silo when they're working on certain projects or if they're working in-house as well. So just curious, what do B2B marketers often get wrong with content marketing and how can they do it much better?

Brooklin:

I think the biggest thing I've seen, both in-house and kind of coming in as a contractor and helping companies figure out their content, is almost thinking that content marketing is this very limited function instead of content being applicable. No matter what channel you're talking about or almost no matter what team on your Go-To-Market you're talking about, you're going to need content. Whether that's customer success, sales, marketing - all the different facets in Marketing so field marketing, demand gen, content, SEO and social, customer marketing - all these elements, right?

Brooklin:

So I haven't seen a ton of companies take that broader view and set up a content strategy, and almost editorial strategy, to manage that across all those different teams within the go-to-market org. I think I can think of two off the top of my head: one was my previous startup where they had that role in place that would kind of connect all the dots for everybody, instead of thinking about content strategy as SEO or content as social or specific channels, right.

Dani:

Sorry, Brooklyn, I'm just going to pause for a second because that's actually a good point you brought up there. I feel like a lot of people tend to think content is just written content or content is just one particular format for one particular channel. But really, the strategic element is missing in a lot of content marketers even. So, I know you primarily focused on content writing within the first half of your career, and you mentioned that, and then you eventually expanded to talk about content strategy and to actually take on content strategy. So how can content marketers really elevate that strategic thinking?

Brooklin:

Yeah, I mean, I guess it depends on whether you're in-house or you're a content marketer who's come on as a consultant, or a freelance writer or what have you. In terms of strategy, honestly, this might sound a little cliché but it's been super helpful the last couple of years to just almost continuously have conversations with other marketers in the space because there are so many elements that go into it, right? I touch a very small portion of it, like 10% or less of what you could conceivably do with not just marketing, but even just content marketing. So just always talking to other people about what they're working on, what they're thinking about, what channels to prioritize, which formats to prioritize, down to the nitty-gritty like do you gated or

ungated content. That's been super helpful because then even if I don't have the opportunity to work on it directly, at least I have some perspective on how others are thinking about it. What others are working on, and what works and what doesn't.

Dani:

And from the conversations you've had, what are some trends that you've been seeing, because I know there was a recent debate going on about ungating versus gating content, and then back to gating again. What is it that you're seeing so far right now?

Brooklin:

Yeah, a few things. One, I think moving beyond just the concept that content marketing equals SEO blog posts, right? I think lots of people are exploring different alternatives whether it's a video series on LinkedIn or a full-fledged documentary. Some people, like I think it was Joey Chan, did a full documentary series on her onboarding experience which fit in with the tool that she was coming on board with.

Brooklin:

There are lots of elements that you can bring into content. If you're wanting to stand out it's worth exploring like, is a podcast going to resonate with our audience, will a video series, do we do LinkedIn Live conversations, how do we repurpose this? There's a lot you can do. And I think number two is I'm seeing more and more... and I mean benchmark studies and original data is not new, but I think more and more companies, even earlier stage companies, are starting to prioritize that because I think almost no matter what your audience is or looks like or whether you're selling into sales or HR or to small businesses, they're hungry for validated information. So if you can back up your content with either original data where you're actually going out and collecting from a statistically significant population and making conclusions, or pulling in outside perspectives and pulling in lots of quotes and almost treating it like a Journalistic piece, those pieces are going to stand out and I think those approaches are getting more and more popular.

Dani:

Yeah, that's actually a really good tip. I think a lot of companies are not really doing this right now because they're really reliant on third-party data. I think there's a running joke in the content marketing community where it's like, I refer to a study, that refers to a study, that refers to a study.

Brooklin:

Oh, man. Yeah, that's the content marketer's worst nightmare! You find a 2021 blog post that refers to a 2017 white paper that refers to a 2014 something that then refers to a 2009 report, right? And then you're like okay this is 12 years outdated.

Dani:

Yeah, exactly. And people keep on just regurgitating the same thing. So, do you have any tips on how people can really start collecting data for content? Whether it be from internally within their team or product, or outside of the team. How do you do your research?

Brooklin:

Yeah, I mean, it depends on what your product is. If your product is well suited to actually collecting that data from usage, from how your users are using your product, I think leverage that. I think a few people are doing that well. Or if it's aimed at giving data to your customers, so folks like Intricately give insights on how cloud companies are spending, Meteoradar gives insights to ad spend. But even if it doesn't, you have examples like Gong where they have hundreds of thousands or millions of hours of recorded calls and they can apply their engineering skills to slice and dice that and figure out what works and what doesn't.

Brooklin:

So, if it's well suited to that, go for it. If it's not, I think it's worth a good slice of your marketing budget to put into that. I mean, a research report that pulls on you 500 plus responses from people who fit your ICP doesn't cost that much in the grand scheme of things, and it's something that you can do once and then use for six-plus months across all of your channels. You can use it for social, you can use it for email marketing, you can feed it to your salespeople, you can bring it into customer success conversations - like it just goes on and on and on.

Brooklin:

I'm definitely not the expert on that. If you're looking at how to actually go through it step by step, creating a research report like that, I'd recommend connecting with Erin Balsa. She's at Predictive Index right now and she has a whole course on running research reports like this. She gives a budget breakdown, she gives recommendations for outsourcing, and she gives info about even how to craft your survey questions. It's a great resource.

Dani:

Oh yeah, I'll definitely reach out to her. Thanks for the great guest recommendation there. One thing you talked about that really excites me is that you mentioned the repurposing piece, so creating this pillar piece of content that you spend so long on and making sure you have all the facts straight. But then another content marketing person's nightmare, I would say, is when you create a piece of content and it doesn't get used. So how do you think teams can really start repurposing their content and making sure that the shelf life of content really starts lasting longer?

Brooklin:

I think it starts at the very beginning of thinking through a piece of content. I mean, you don't have to go through this with every single piece of content if you're putting out like SEO blogs and case studies and things like that, but if you're considering a larger piece of content that's going to take months to produce then bring in as many people as you can. Like, talk to sales, talk to customer success, talk to your engineers - figure out what questions you should be asking, and figure out what's going to resonate.

Brooklin:

Figure out what questions prospects and customers are asking and work that in and then when

you turn around as a content team or a marketer and you're saying 'look everybody, we have these slides and we have these images you can use on social and we have these pieces of content you can work into nurture campaigns...' you're going to receive a much better response. Not just because you've been talking to these people from earlier on but also because it's going to resonate better with a wider range of stakeholders because you've had those conversations.

Dani:

Yeah, that's actually really good advice. I never thought about it from the beginning because I think what a lot of content marketers do is to create the content and then they're like 'okay well fingers crossed people are going to start using it' and then they're like, 'oh shit, well people are not using it, let's start repurposing it' but because they haven't built the relationships, there's still a gap there where the people aren't fully bought in or maybe they need to be spoonfed a little bit with regards to like what messaging could you use, how could you use this piece of content, etc. So that's really good advice there.

Brooklin:

Yeah, that's exactly it.

Dani:

So let's talk a little bit about content in general, like what makes good and bad content? I see these terms being thrown out all the time on LinkedIn and how people are complaining about bad content and good content. What is that to you?

Brooklin:

Yeah, I mean, if you're to boil everything down I'd say good content is unique and bad content blends in with everything else. I mean, marketing is always spread thin, right? There are always too few marketers for how much marketing work there is to be done, so you end up focusing on the quickest fixes that will get things out the door as soon as possible. So you can get that landing page up and start generating leads or you can get even detailed stuff like a research report or a white paper out because the end goal is tied to demand gen.

Brooklin:

I think good content takes the time to consider if it's unique and if it's adding to the conversation, or if it's just noise. And I think if it's unique it's going to be stickier, and it might take longer to get out the door, but I think it's going to have a larger impact down the road because content at the end of the day is not... yes you often have to tie content to demand gen, but at the end of the day, it's not just about demand gen. It's about building your brand, it's about having quality conversations. Good content brings all those pieces in whether it's partner marketing or customer marketing or demand gen or social and SEO - all these channels that flow out of those. It's able to be used across all of those channels rather than feeling like you have 'oh this white paper is for the demand gen team so that they can get leads from conversion on the gated page' and 'this piece is an SDO article so we can rank above our competitors.' It's taking a bigger picture and making sure you're actually offering something unique.

Dani:

And I think Marketers need to be a little bit more honest with themselves about that too because sometimes we create things within almost like a little bubble, like 'hey this seems like a pretty cool piece of content' but if it's not what the audience is actually looking for then clearly it's not resonating somehow.

Brooklin:

Yeah, exactly. Like, what's going to make people stop and consider and take a screenshot or send an email to somebody or share on social. Those are the questions that you need to be asking. Because we'll put like \$3000 in a month into creating a white paper that people spend 45 seconds skimming but then you get their information because it's a gated whitepaper, so for you, it's a win but for them, it's not really a win.

Dani:

Yeah, absolutely. Oh my gosh I think you just triggered something there where I've done the same thing like I feel called out a little bit but it's true. Because sometimes like you spend so long creating this piece of content and it's almost like a bait and switch, right, where the person is looking for one specific thing but you create like this long piece where they're trying to find that thing so instead of like creating such a big resource sometimes you can do it in terms of micro content as well.

Brooklin:

Yeah, exactly.

Dani:

And you mentioned also that content marketing nowadays is not just about written content. So what are your thoughts on other content formats and do you have any examples on how you've found success with other formats as well?

Brooklin:

Yeah, that's a good question. I think there are lots of examples of success outside of written content but it's just not my forte - I very much focus on long-form content, especially in my client work. When I was with Outreach I focused on some video series and podcasts, but even then to be honest... I mean Samantha Henbury who is my direct report on the team and she's still there, she was the lead person on that and the mastermind of launching a new podcast and some of the video series that we got going with partners. So I had some guidance there but I don't have a ton of experience of actually executing on it, right? I just kind of gave some feedback on what the topics were and guests and what we want for the new podcast and all of that. But I definitely think it has a big place in content marketing, it's just not something I have a ton of experience in, to be honest.

Dani:

Yeah, no worries and that's fair enough. I think we can really see the qualitative evidence when we scroll on LinkedIn or when we get emails - the things that kind of jump out to me personally,

as someone who subscribes but also is a marketer, is when it's something new and interactive. I think a lot of companies are starting to use, for example, memes, short videos, infographics, things like that, rather than a wall of text. I think what makes people tired is when you're reading too much and there isn't anything else that's stimulating you.

Brooklin:

Yeah, a couple of examples of that where it's not even full-fledged video content or audio content, it's just making the written content more interactive and engaging - I was just in a report from es summer venture partners which is a VC firm, and they did a whole report on the cloud market and SaaS market and it was pretty straightforward data, I mean kind of shocking too with the growth that we've seen this last year, but they had callout boxes and things like that but for every graph it was this gif that looped, right? So instead of a static graph, it built from 2019 to 2020 to 2021. And I spent fifteen minutes in the article, reading through it, looking at the graphs, I saved some of them. How often do you spend that long with a piece of content in B2B? So to me, that was a super great example of it. I don't think it took that much extra lift with whatever designers they're working with but it made it stand out for sure.

Brooklin:

And then another example is Revenue Squared. They have a ton of benchmark data and they make it super accessible and they do package some up with co-branded reports where it's a downloadable pdf, right? But on the website, they also have this data like front and center where you can put in your own company's data benchmark against all the data they have and it puts you in like first, second, third, fourth quartile and then you can click on each piece and it'll give you recommendations, like if you're in the lower percentile, how to move up to a higher percentile or whatever it is. So it makes it super interactive even though at the base of it, it's benchmark data which is nothing new.

Dani:

I love that. That's already something that's actionable when you read the content. It's very rare to find pieces like that where you read a piece and you stumble upon it and you're like 'well I can actually apply this right away.' That's a really great example. So, one other question I had for you actually is how can B2B marketing leaders get more from their content to drive revenue? I know a lot of content marketers, they tend to say really just the basics like views, shares, and engagement, but are there any ways where they can think beyond the box?

Brooklin:

This might be only feasible in a large organization with a more mature function across marketing and sales but, if you can bring in somebody that can focus on the content editorial strategy across the board, I think you're gonna see such a larger impact of the content that you're developing. At the end of the day, if social content and sales enablement content almost rolls up to the same person and it connects the dots, I think you'll see a much higher ROI. And sometimes that'll involve coming on board with a sales enablement platform where you can feed content and see how reps are using it, and build kind of micro sites for customers and prospects, so it's kind of at a later stage when you can get into that - but I don't know that there's

any reason that you have to create silos around what types of content you're creating. I think you can get a lot more strategic about bringing everything together.

Dani:

Yeah, absolutely. I think sales enablement is such a big piece and there are so many marketers out there who are not even creating it for the benefit of the sales team. I feel like a lot of time, it's more the top funnel pieces of content that get a lot of love. But the more down the funnel the more difficult that it tends to get, and sometimes there's not enough resources to really create and address the entire funnel itself.

Brooklin:

At the very least, figure out how to divide your content efforts across - this is focused on the bottom of funnel, this is focused on the top of the funnel. But at the end of the day both content marketing managers, whether they're focused on the bottom or top of the funnel, they roll up into the same person so that there's you know a connection there.

Dani:

So what's one campaign fail that you'd like to share? So within your career were there any pieces of content that you created that did not perform as expected, even though you had high expectations? And what did you learn from that?

Brooklin:

Yeah, I saw this question and I had a very specific example in mind. We talked about original research and reporting and kind of giving something tangible to your audience, and that's something we did at my previous startup. We spent 2 or 3 months gathering a bunch of data from 1000+ respondees on how they were using specific tools and what kind of ROI they were seeing, what kind of impact on their sales rep efficiency they were seeing, and what adoption for the tool across the board looked like, and we compared a little over forty tools. So just basically a guide to give people something tangible to compare these tools across, right? And this is kind of a self-indictment because earlier I also said make sure you involve as many people as possible in the content creation process and it was something that I spearheaded.

Brooklin:

And I think we saw some great responses, I mean we pulled together a great report out of it, but at the end of the day the platform that I was working for was included in the report and there was one point of comparison where the platform I was working with didn't compare super favourably to its competitors in the category. So we launched it. we had all our plans for getting it out across all these channels, but a few days after launch a sales leader flagged it and we ended up having to essentially shelve the whole thing. I mean we kept it up and all that but we couldn't put it across our email channels and social and repurposing and all of these pieces that we had planned out.

Brooklin:

So that was a little bit of 2 things: One, It was definitely on me for not involving as many people

as I should have involved and kind of gut checking some of these results that we were seeing. But then on the other hand, honestly, it was a little bit of a perspective shift that I think was missing. Like I said at the beginning, not everything has to be tied to demand gen and not everything has to be tied to competitor-type conversations and sales. Like, if you're looking at being a leader in a specific category you need to be able to give somewhat objective information about the category and just kind of drive the conversation around it. So it seemed a little bit like a limited perspective on what the impact of this specific piece of content could be. You know, it was an opportunity to build trust, it was an opportunity to have more partner conversations because we included a ton of existing partners and a ton of potential partners in the study. There was an opportunity to build community and drive discussions there - just all these things that aren't tied to lead gen and conversions to demos, but still would position this platform in the space. And I think that they just weren't ready for that perspective.

Dani:

Yeah, these are really good learnings. I feel like when it comes to thought leadership content a lot of companies still think thought leadership is such a buzzword, they don't really know how to do it properly. But I definitely agree with you, I think when it comes to having an opinion it could be done in a way where you're actually making this your competitive advantage, where there's a clear cut way of thinking that your company has that's different from your competitors. Sometimes it's not about the data or whatnot, it's about actually just making sure you have a view that's unique to you.

Brooklin:

Yep, exactly. And offering resources to your audience that aren't available elsewhere.

Dani:

Yeah, 100%. What is one thing that you think companies can do to make their thought leadership content better or more high quality?

Brooklin:

I think just more transparency. I think some brands do it better than others where not every piece of content has to be about how amazing your company is, it can be about what the struggles are or what you're thinking about and going through as you... everything from as granular as figuring out how to optimize your onboarding, like you don't have to pretend that your onboarding is amazing if it's not, you just have to document and share honestly what it is looking like and how you're trying to improve. On down things like diversity, I think there's a tendency for any company, including B2B SaaS, to be like 'this is our stance on diversity and we're doing awesome' But if you actually take in the numbers and you look and you're not doing amazing, I think it's going to be a much more honest and impactful conversation if you can step back and say 'well we just took stock of where we're at and we're not doing great at diversity, but these are the steps we want to take and we want your input' - like that's gonna be a lot more impactful. I use diversity because maybe that probably could be the most impactful, and it has the most impact on your people and your employees, but you could apply that to anything whether that's like your efficiency in your sales team or your deal cycle if you're wanting to

reduce it. Just being transparent in what steps you're taking to improve I think goes a lot further than trying to champion yourself.

Dani:

Yeah, that's actually really good advice. I think being able to be fully authentic even though sometimes it's like blenders, right? Not every tech company is perfect. The imperfectness actually allows you to really build trust with your audience much faster. I think I read something on what Devin from Gong was saying, he was saying don't write with perfect grammar because people can smell BS from far away and they think that that's too perfect, it's not actually how you're talking. Whereas when we talk sometimes we're going to make some blenders and mistakes but it's also a little bit more authentic so people really connect to that and they really want to associate themselves with companies that feel like themselves.

Brooklin:

Yeah, then it applies, I mean, just like we were talking about for other types of content. Like, if you're talking about thought leadership, your goal in thought leadership isn't limited to driving as many qualified leads to your company as possible. It goes way beyond that. You're talking about attracting talent, you're talking about your brand, you're talking about rareness, you're talking about a healthy culture, you're talking about partnerships, you're talking about customer retention. There's so many other factors that go into it.

dani:

Yeah, absolutely. So this is my last question for you. I know we talked a lot about what things you've learned throughout your career and suggestions for content marketing leaders, but I also want to talk about successes. So is there one recent project that you worked on that you were really proud of? And what did you learn from that success?

Brooklin:

To be honest, in my previous startup, I am pretty proud of what we accomplished. We did increase traffic by quite a bit, I think it was close to 60% over my year there. And this was not me, I was leading a few contractors in the team, but there's a lot of work that went into it. But I think it showed me that a lot of that came from search and I think it showed me that there's a lot of benefits that can come from focusing on a very specific thing for a certain amount of time. And we had very specific pieces that we put into that - we optimized existing pages, we kind of shifted what new content was going out the door to make sure that it aligned with those goals of gaining traffic, right? And we accomplished that over the year so it was pretty fun to work on it and see the results.

Dani:

One thing you mentioned there that's such a quick win for so many companies is just updating content. You mentioned you did that and just tweaked a few things, right? Sometimes you don't have to really reinvent the wheel there.

Brooklin:

Oh yeah. Any company I've worked on SEO for, which is not my main focus anymore but I still do it, there's such an impact from just updating your existing client. I've done it with 3 or 4 clients and then both startups I've worked with in-house, and it's had almost a bigger impact actually than the new content has.

Dani:

Yeah and that's such a like easy win instead of creating new resources.

Brooklin:

Yeah, it's cheaper, it's faster, and it's more impactful because you're not talking about the same topic in 4 different ways - you're just updating what you have so that it is relevant. Yeah, I think it's a win all around.

Dani:

I love that approach. Well, thank you so much, Brooklyn. I really enjoyed talking to you on the podcast and honestly, I've learned a lot that I think we are able to implement at Lumen5 as well, so that's also quite meta. It's the reason why we love doing these podcasts, just to learn from other marketers and to also apply them ourselves.

Brooklin:

Thank you, these were great questions.

Dani:

Thank you so much and for those who want to follow Brooklyn he actually has some really great advice as well on his LinkedIn. So I'll make sure to link that in the box below and also feel free to follow him on Twitter as well @realbrooknash, and I'll make sure to include all of these within the blog posts so you guys can definitely check them out.