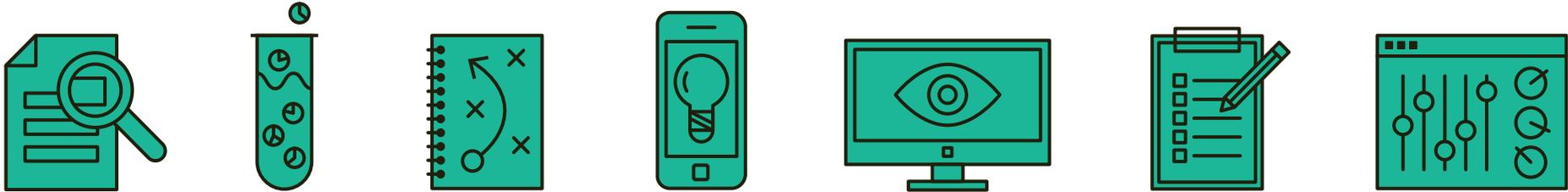


Your **Content Strategy** made simple



AXONN

About **the author**

Having travelled across a rather large pond, from Canada to England, Adrienne Burns joined the London Axonn Media team as an implementation specialist in 2011.

With a background in filmmaking, she brings a creative and unique outlook to the content marketing industry. As the director of client strategy and implementation, Adrienne heads up the consultative offering at Axonn Media.

In working closely with Billy Maddocks (director of data insights and implementation) and our clients directly, her work ensures that content marketing efforts are best aligned to clients' goals in order to get them the results they are after.



Billy Maddocks (director of data insights and implementation) and Adrienne Burns (director of client strategy and implementation)

Introduction



I know you may not have the knowledge about where to start, or perhaps you think it is too late to create your strategy (you're already knee-deep in your marketing plan for the year, for example). That's fine, really! This guide will help give you the basics for how to create and implement your content strategy regardless of where you are starting from.

You can follow these tips in succession or use each chapter individually, but be sure to take the time to really understand the purpose of each element. Going forward this will allow you to build more comprehensive content strategies in a faster and easier way.

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There are a lot of **DEFINITIONS** out there about what content marketing is, and for many of them you would need an interpreter to understand how they apply to you.

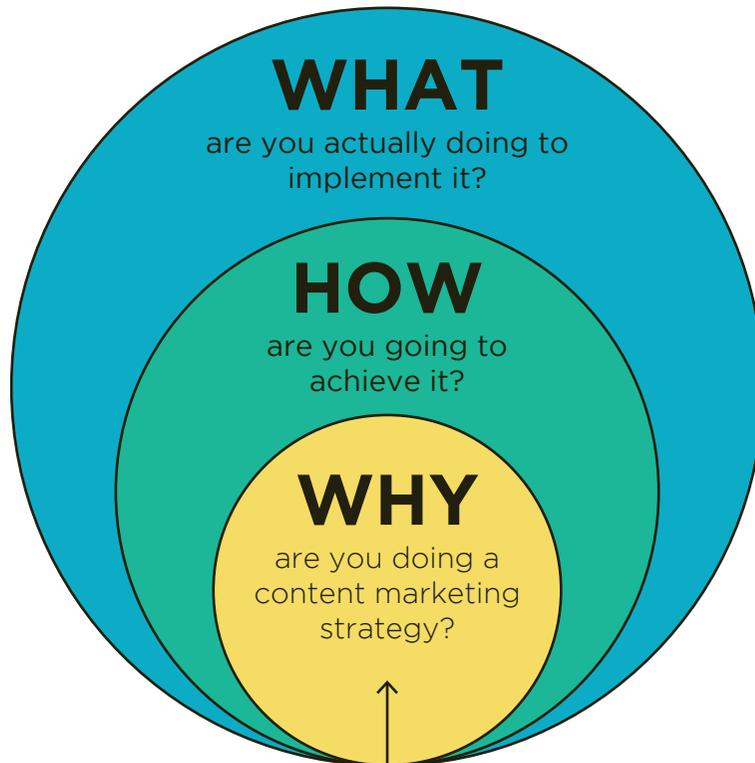
However, we feel that it is also important to understand how content strategy differs from content marketing. At Axonn we define content marketing and content strategy as:

“Content marketing is a non-interruptive marketing technique that allows brands to use helpful and relevant content in order to attract, engage and retain a clearly-defined audience.”

“Content strategy is the script to your content marketing efforts, ensuring harmony between what you create and why you have created it, giving you the best possible outcome.”

1. Why

Before you start anything, you need to ask yourself why you are doing it in the first place. Understanding this will help you outline how you are going to do it and what you need to create to ensure it is successful.



The Golden Circle

Popular author, educator and trained ethnographer Simon Sinek gave a very inspiring TEDx talk on his theory of The Golden Circle. Sinek describes this as a “powerful model for inspirational leadership” that is designed to answer the “why” behind what your organisation does. Filling out the circle is the “how” and the “what”. Answer these and you can better understand how to get genuine buy-in from your customers.

Many marketers have found that there is clear continuity with this method when adapted to their content marketing strategy, with the focus first on the “why”, followed by how they will achieve it and

“*People don't buy what you do. **They buy why you do it.**”*

Simon Sinek, “How Great Leaders Inspire Action” TED Talk.

Strategy is not at term limited to marketing, and American singer Loretta Lynn offers critical wisdom about how you should approach any strategic process.

In the age of the internet, it is becoming harder to be the first or the best at what you do.

So you need to work out how you can be *DIFFERENT* and gain the advantage.



“You either have to be the **first, best** or **different.**”

Loretta Lynn, American country music singer-songwriter.

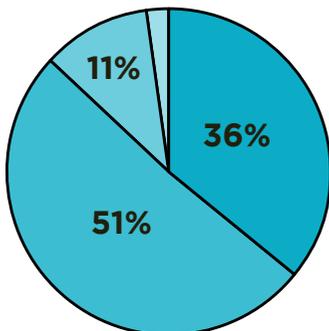
So why do you need a strategy? Your strategy is your roadmap - it's what gets you from your why to your how to your what. It's the guide that takes you from what you want to achieve all the way to actually achieving it.

But it's one thing to have a strategy in your mind when planning the steps involved in working towards your goal, but it's easy to lose track of your focus or direction. The most effective marketers, (according to the Content Marketing Institute's 2015 UK Budgets, Benchmarks and Trends report), are the ones that have a written-down content strategy.

HOWEVER, ONLY 36% OF UK MARKETERS HAVE A DOCUMENTED STRATEGY.

Strategy is also about measuring success, but how do you determine success? It's important to decide on these factors before proceeding with your strategy and discuss this with your team - your sales director might see success as good leads for their team, but your marketing

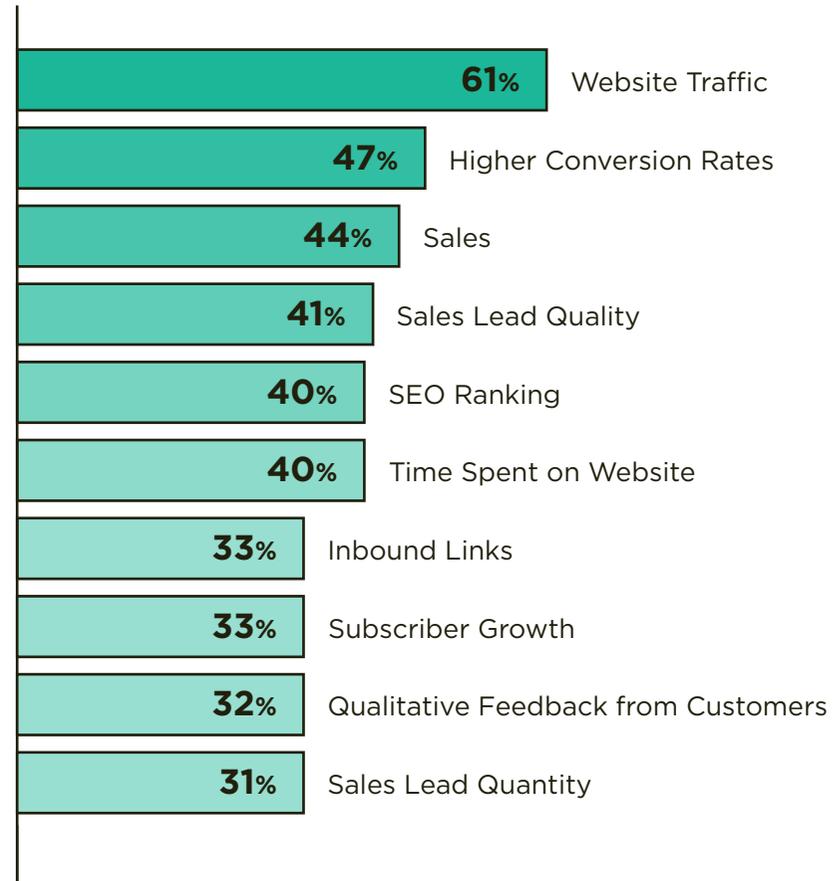
UK MARKETERS WHO HAVE A CONTENT STRATEGY



36% Yes (it's documented)
51% Yes (but it's not documented)
11% No
2% Unsure

Content Marketing in the UK: 2015 Benchmarks, Budgets and Trends: Content Marketing Institute/DMA UK

MEASUREMENT CRITERIA FOR CONTENT MARKETING SUCCESS



Content Marketing in the UK: 2015 Benchmarks, Budgets and Trends: Content Marketing Institute/DMA UK

2. How to start

Whether you are starting a brand new marketing plan or are midway through one, there are some core activities that we recommend you consider to ensure you start off on the right foot.

GET THE RIGHT PEOPLE INVOLVED.

As I am sure you have experienced, it can be very difficult to get all stakeholders in one room, particularly for long enough to make significant progress with creating a strategy. However, it really does make a difference if you can get everyone who has a say in the business priorities together, at least once, to kickstart the strategy discussions.

HAVE STRATEGY-FOCUSED MEETINGS.

It is recommended that you block out at least an hour across one or two sessions and ensure you have an appointed lead person running the session and taking notes. What you want to get out of these initial meetings is the following:

The WHY

- Outline and agree the business priorities for the upcoming quarter.
- Based on the priorities, pinpoint who on the team is best placed to take ownership over each one.
- What is the desired goal or outcome for each of these priorities?
- Who are the target audiences?

The HOW

- Discuss how this strategy will be implemented. For example, do you need to create a new area on your website or will social media channels be a critical part of the execution?
- What other teams (e.g. technical, video or graphics) would need to be involved to execute these plans?

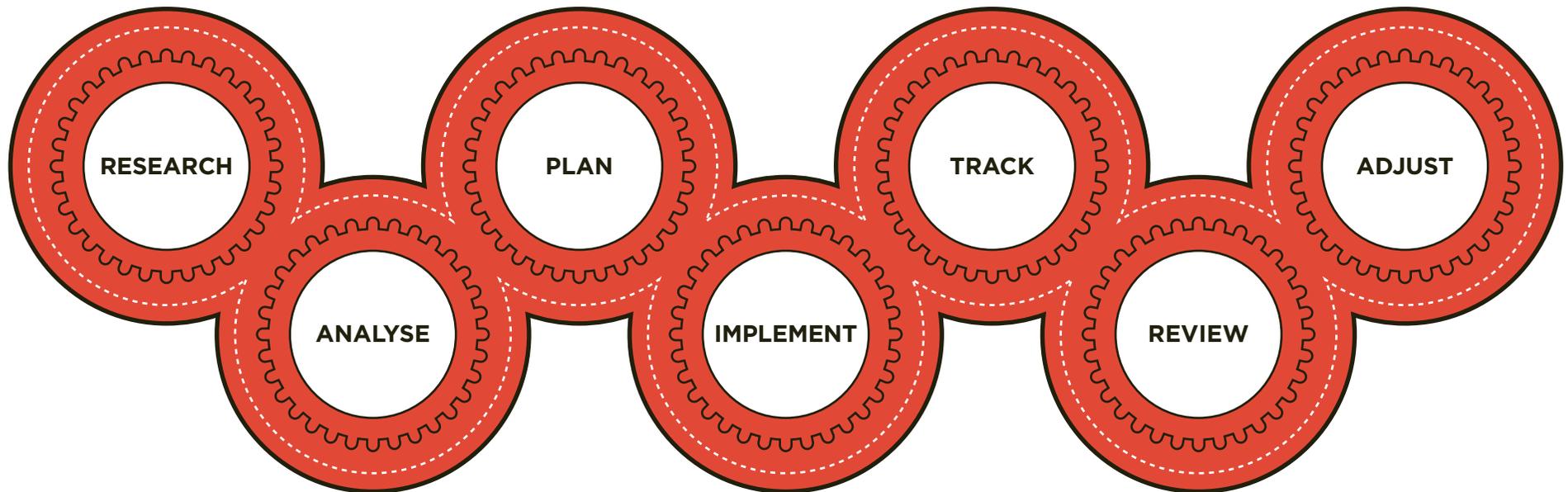
The WHAT will relate to the individual assets that need to be created to support the first two objectives (the why and the how). This stage comes in a little bit later, as it's a good idea to first review the assets you already have available.

3. Strategy process

Documenting your strategy is one of the most important things you can do to ensure everyone is on the same page. This should be considered a “living” document which you will refer back to, tweak and develop as time goes on.

It should include **WHY** you are producing a strategy, **HOW** you are undertaking it and **WHAT** you are going to produce. Last (but not least) it should have what you want to track to show ROI and what you consider to be a successful outcome.

There are many different ways to set out a strategy process. However, we have found that breaking it into sections helps keep it moving in the right direction and gives your strategy the best possible chance of succeeding.



1. RESEARCH. Discovering who your audience is, what their interests and pain points are, and where they are online is key to being able to create a targeted content campaign.



2. ANALYSE. This does not mean just looking at your own data. Once you have a good idea who your audience is, use social listening tactics, surveys, competitor analysis and your own analytics to help validate those findings.



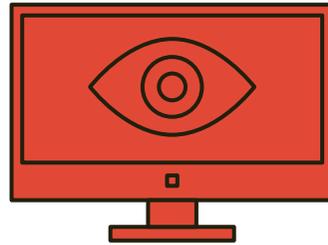
3. PLAN. Once you have done the research and analysis you need to turn the strategy into reality. You now need to work out what resources you need and therefore what the most appropriate content is for addressing your audience's needs and pain points. This plan is the guide that all stakeholders refer to when making sure the strategy is running on course. Don't be afraid to change the plan as the strategy develops.



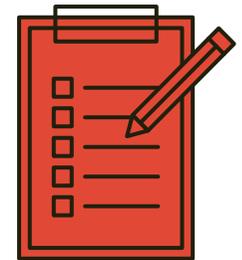
4. IMPLEMENT. In the planning stage you checked all your resourcing and the feasibility of the implementation process. In this stage you get things up and running. You need to make sure that all teams involved have what they need to execute the elements correctly and on time and also that they are referring to the strategy documentation regularly.



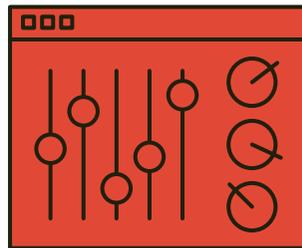
5. TRACK. The worst thing you could do is just sit back and relax after implementing your strategy. In your strategy document you will have outlined what tracking metrics needed to be set up and monitored and how often you should review them.



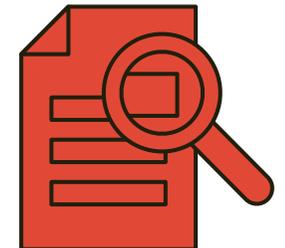
6. REVIEW. This is the time where you review the performance to assess the successes just as much as the failures, comparing them against your KPIs. Knowing what isn't working will help you get results faster.



7. ADJUST. You now know what has worked and what hasn't, so go back to your strategy document and amend it. Continuous adjustment is important to achieving success, so if you are making large changes, follow the steps in order again where appropriate.



1. RESEARCH



4. Research

As discussed in Chapter 2, you should have now booked in (or even had) your first meeting to agree why a strategy is needed and what priorities your team has.

In this stage you are officially kicking off the project by gathering the necessary research to create and implement a successful strategy. Although there is no hard-and-fast rule about how you gather this information or what specific steps you should follow, here are some options that we have used successfully with clients in the past.



UNDERSTANDING THE BUSINESS OBJECTIVES AND GETTING BUY-IN

It is one thing knowing what you want to achieve from a specific strategy; however, keeping in mind why - in terms of your overall business goals - will help ensure you have a tangible reference point to keep you on track.

Each stakeholder will have different resources available and be at different stages of achieving their business goals. In order to align these goals, you need to:

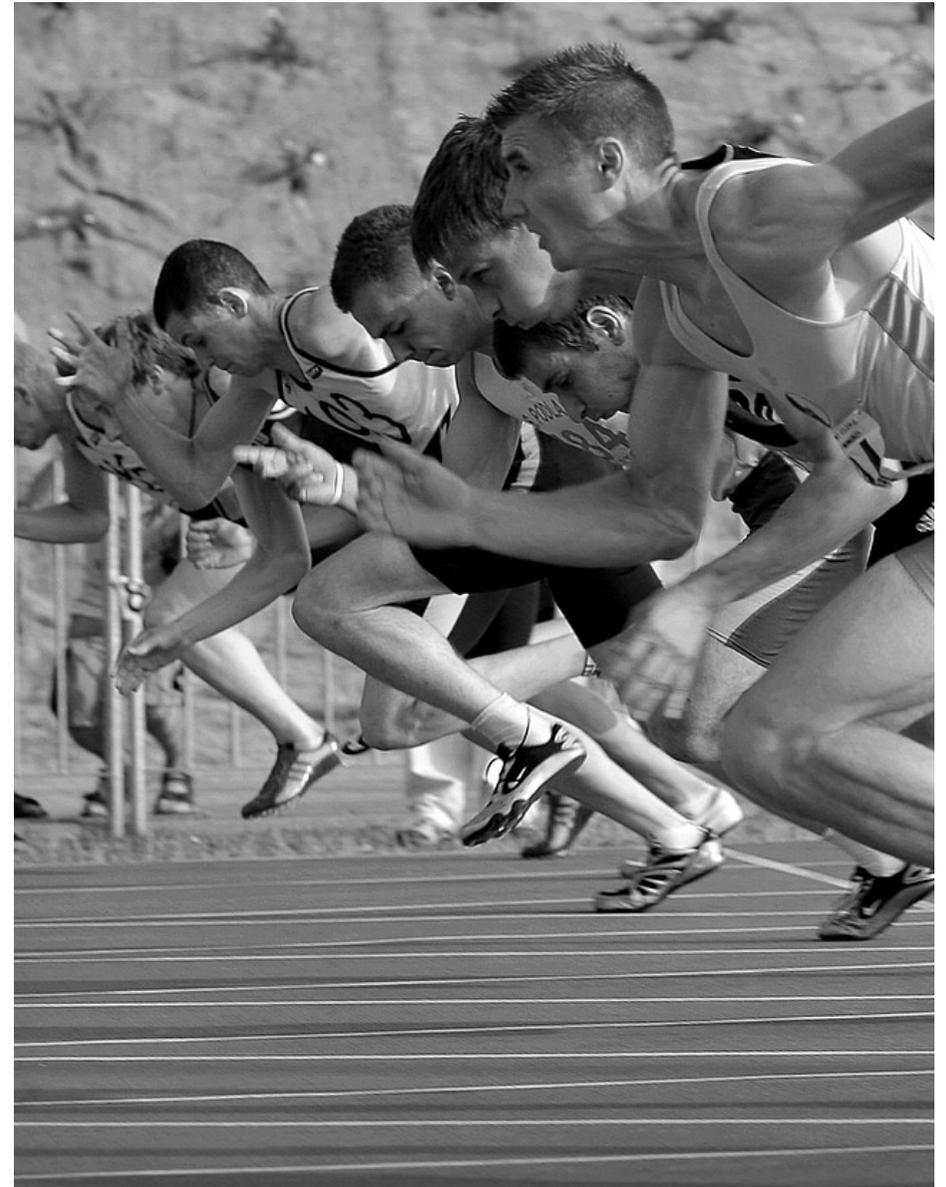
- Map out who owns what - create a list of all internal teams involved and what they have ownership over.
- Interview or survey the teams to better understand what their current and future priorities are.
- Collate and document the information, then share with all teams.
- Agree on the documented priorities.



INDUSTRY BENCHMARKING

Once you know what the priorities are, you need to look at what is happening in your industry and with your competitors.

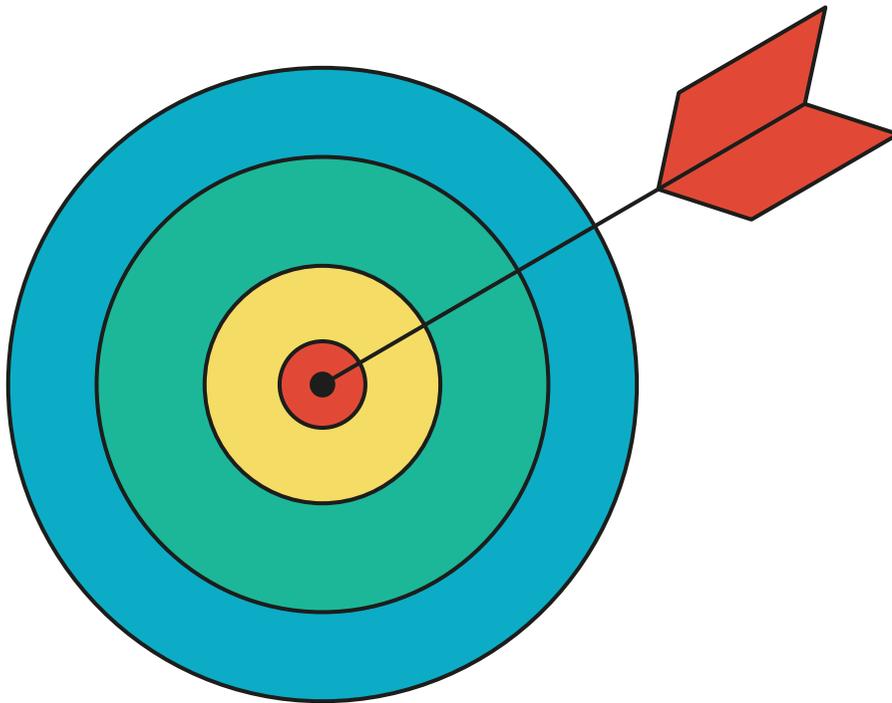
- Use the internet. What specific services do you offer and who dominates the search results space right now?
- Speak with your sales and marketing teams. Who do they see as your competition?
- Define a list of things you want to find out about your competitors to better inform your strategic goals. Where are they dominating (on social, offline etc)?
- What can you learn from what they are doing well?
- What is your USP and how can you add more value?
- What could be preventing you from getting ahead (perhaps the user experience or optimisation of your website, or lack of social presence)?



PERSONA DEVELOPMENT

Knowing who your current customers are and how you can get new customers is crucial to creating a targeted and successful strategic campaign.

One thing that doesn't always come to mind is assessing if your current customer base is actually who you want to be attracting in the future. This is the time where you can outline this information and make informed decisions about who you choose to target with your strategy.



- Come up with a list of criteria that will help you understand who your customer is and how you can profile them (i.e. approximate age, gender, job title, industry, pain points).
- Interview the internal teams which are closest to your customers such as sales or customer service, to get them to fill out your criteria to the best of their knowledge.
- Create a rough idea of what your personas look like to better help you find out who they are and what they are interested in online.
- Show this persona draft to your internal teams and get their feedback. Make the changes to your draft - now you are ready to validate it.

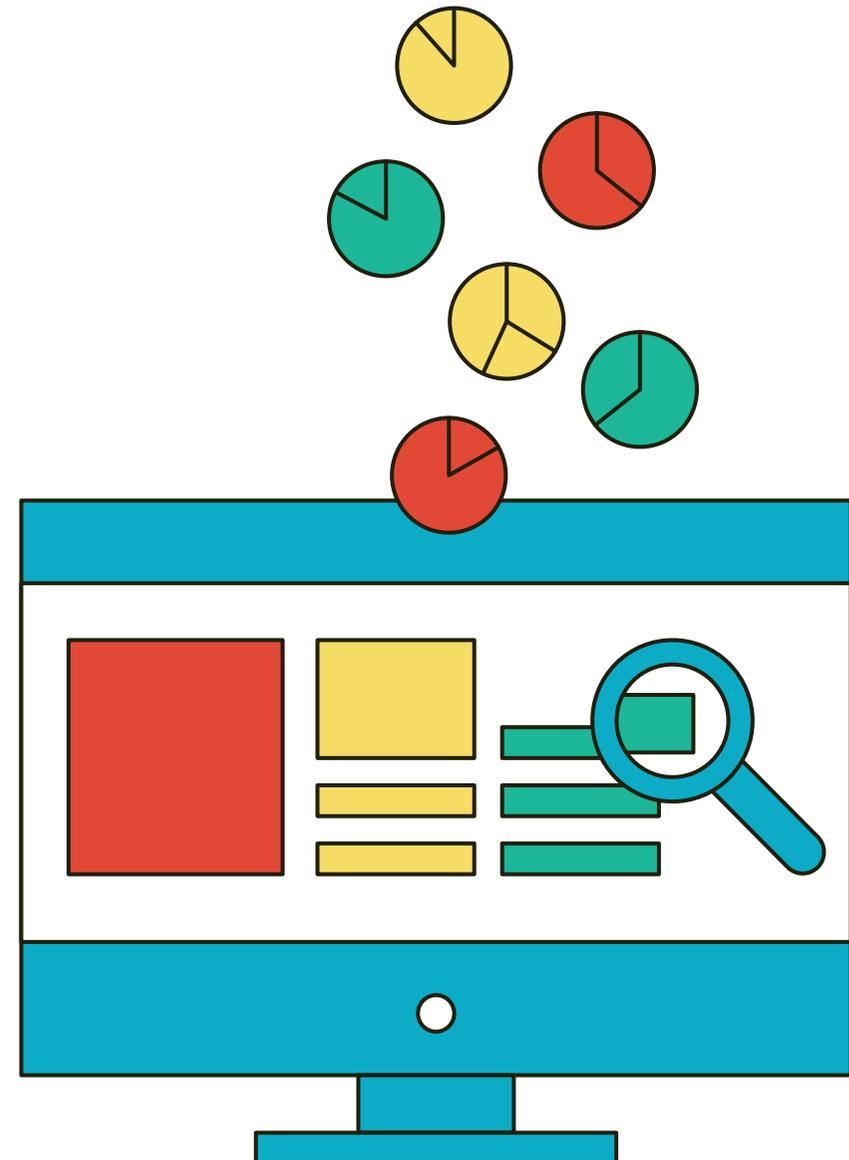
SURVEYS FOR RESEARCH

Surveys are primarily used in two ways, internal and external. Internal surveys typically are those sent to a database of clients whereas external surveys poll a large group of targeted people, many of whom may not have heard of your brand before. External surveys can be much more expensive to produce as they will require a PR element or perhaps joining up with a professional survey company.

Internal surveys are ideal for gathering information that can help validate who your customers are, or how satisfied they are with a particular product/service. If you want to develop a new product or find out what type of content your audience is interested in reading, internal surveys can help.

External surveys are great to collect unique industry data, which you can turn into thought leadership content. This can then help with brand awareness and lead capture.

If you start with the why, in terms of understanding what you want to find out from the audience being surveyed, you can work backwards to create the right questions. Of course creating leading questions will not help get accurate or realistic information, so be careful how you word them!



5. Analysis

Once you have all of the information from your research phase, you need to turn it into something tangible through analysis and identification of key trends. Analysis does not always mean looking at spreadsheets. It can be qualitative as well as quantitative, and can involve a number of platforms and methods.



GOOGLE ANALYTICS AND WEBMASTER TOOLS

Traditionally reviewing these tools was left up to the experts. However, more marketers are now using them to help inform their strategic approach. You don't need to be an analytics master, but it is important to learn how to look at the data in relation to what you are trying to achieve. Here at Axonn, deeper analysis comes from the Data Insights team where required.

One of the quickest ways to review the data that matters to you is by setting up a dashboard. Dashboards allow you to create custom widgets using the data stored by Google Analytics. This means you can review your website performance in relation to your strategy without the need to fully understand the ins and outs of Google Analytics. These are quick to set up, fully customisable and the widgets and date ranges can be adjusted easily.

Webmaster Tools is helpful for understanding how your site is being seen in search in terms of overall performance, keyword analysis and website health (e.g. broken links and Google alerts).



SURVEYS FOR ANALYSIS

Once the survey results from your research phase have come back it's really important to analyse what they mean. It is very easy at this stage to read through your responses and pick out the survey answers that suit you. Make sure you keep an open mind and note down key takeaways fairly.

A technique to help you do this can be to write down and tally problems that re-occur along with keywords. Do this with multiple people within your company and then summarise your findings together.



COMPETITOR ANALYSIS

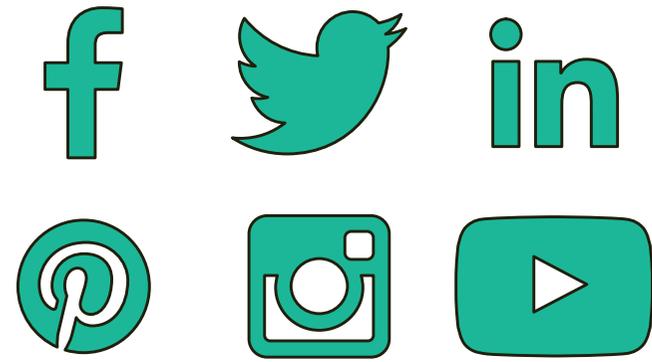
We have spoken briefly about competitors in Chapter 4 (Research), when discussing industry benchmarking. Whereas industry benchmarking is a wider analysis of who is out there in the broader industry, competitor analysis is honing in on those who are directly competing for the same audience or who provide very similar services or products.

When starting your competitor analysis we suggest looking in the following areas:

- **Search performance** - Using tools such as the Moz software platform.
- **Comparing website user experience** - Using focus groups or “talk out loud” testing.
- **Content audit/analysis** - This is more of a manual process. See what topics they are focusing on and how they are leading users through the buyer cycle.
- **Social media** - Using tools or through a manual process, aim to find out how well they are doing across the core platforms. Do they post regularly? How many likes, mentions or retweets do they have? What are they talking about and how is their brand perceived (reviews etc)?

SOCIAL LISTENING

Once you have an idea who your persona is and the pain points they experience, you need to find out if this really is the case. Looking at social platforms and industry forums will help you better understand your target audience and the challenges they face. For example, you may discover that the target persona is asking vital questions in a LinkedIn group that your product or service helps to solve.



6. Planning

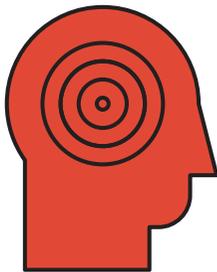
It is not always about starting from scratch when looking to create content for your strategy. Most marketers have a number of content assets already created for in-house purposes or current clients that could be helpful in attracting new business.



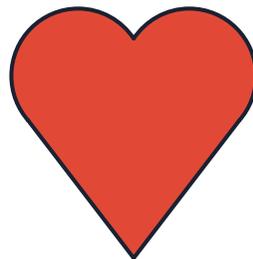
One of the ways you can segment your content is by identifying where it fits into the buyer cycle stage.



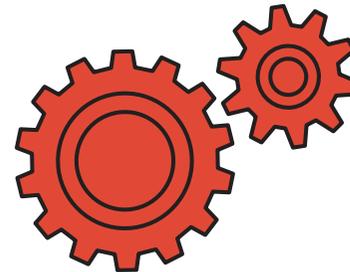
WE USE THE FOLLOWING FOUR STAGES:



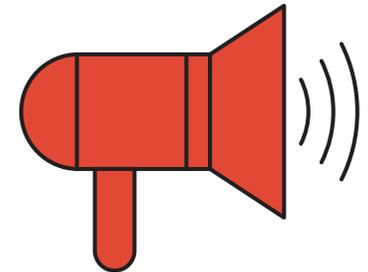
1. Awareness



2. Interest



3. Action



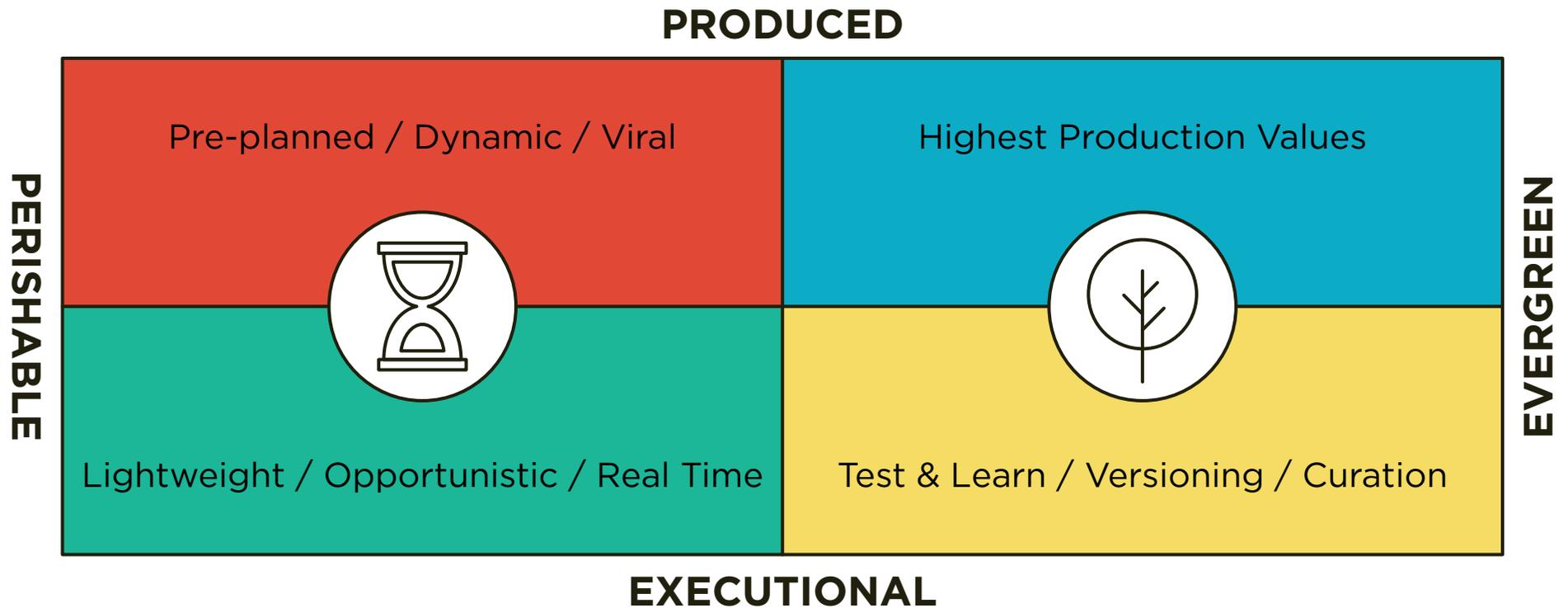
4. Advocacy

PLOTTING THE CONTENT

To help identify and plot content we like to reference the Kraft Foods content ideation tool created by Julie Fleischer, director of media and consumer engagement at Kraft Foods. Her model allows you to organise content into a quadrant, which gives you better visibility on what you are creating. Using a grid like this also helps with identifying the purpose, cost and longevity of each piece.

Similarly, you can look to use the grid for planning new content topics. By keeping your new and existing content in one area you will see patterns emerge. Pick up on duplicate themes and perhaps find better ways to repurpose old content into new campaigns.

The two axes that Kraft uses when plotting content into the quadrant are: Produced/Executional and Perishable/Evergreen.





Before you start plotting the content you have created already, ask yourself the following questions to identify where you may need to scrap or revise:

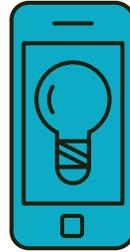
- Is the piece of content outdated? Could you easily update it?
- Would your audience be interested in reading it?
- Could you repurpose it for multiple campaigns?
- Will the information in this piece allow for new pieces of content to be created out of it?
- What is your USP and how can you add more value?
- Does it help achieve a goal for the business?

7. Implementation

If you have clear goals, have planned properly and all your stakeholders are on the same page then the implementation will run perfectly, right?

Well, hopefully, yes but we know the reality is often very different.

As you delegate the tasks to your teams it's important you are on hand to help them and also keep a watchful eye over what they are doing to steer them back towards the strategic goals. From experience of implementing strategies, here are the common things to watch out for:

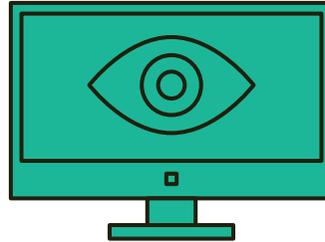


- **Dependencies** - During any implementation there are bound to be dependencies. These are times when specialist teams need another team to finish something before they can start. These will be the most common source of a project being delayed. Therefore we suggest identifying any dependencies in your plan and keeping a very close eye on them, so when something is going wrong you can react quickly and give the resource you need.
- **Technical complications** - Development time is notoriously hard to estimate so whatever deadline you are given from the team, add at least ten per cent more and factor that into your plan.

- **Interpretation of requirements** - It is natural that people interpret things differently, so make sure you clarify that they understand their tasks at the start, so you spot this sooner rather than later. Once you are sure they understand what is required, why it is required and your timeframes, casually check in throughout the process and don't wait until you are close to the delivery date.
- **Flexibility** - You will not have thought of everything, so when a problem comes up, don't be afraid to change the strategy and the implementation plan to accommodate it. Try to spot the problems early by asking the relevant team members what they think could be a roadblock and keep everyone informed if the plan needs to change.
- **Cross-team communication** - One way to ensure the first four points do not become massive problems is to keep everyone who is working on a strategy in close communication. Here at Axonn we use a variety of project management tools (i.e. Slack, Trello, LiquidPlanner) to help track project work and provide an area for everyone to easily join the conversation. Don't leave it up to verbal communication and be careful not to rely too much on email chains as both can cause gaps in communication.

8. Tracking

With a lot of marketers now talking about being more strategic with their content marketing, we have seen an increase in clients having a clearer idea of what they want to achieve. However, the area that still lets them down is not setting out how they will track the milestones on the route to success.



Many people wait to review the strategic findings until after running the campaign, and often then they find the data they review is top-level and could have been influenced by other marketing factors.

So how do you ensure you collect the right information from the start? Well, it is all about working with the right teams to agree your goals and how performance against them can be measured. Similarly, you have to be comfortable looking at the data much more often to ensure you can spot what isn't working faster.

It's always best to start with the end goals and work backwards. As you do this, identify the key milestones users will need to reach on the site. These key milestones are what you want to track. An example milestone would be downloading a whitepaper or viewing a key landing page.

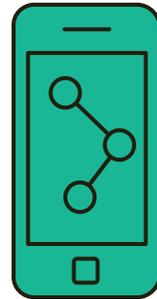
There are a number of ways to track your key milestones and how you set up the tracking will be very dependent on the software you use and the limitations of your website. It's best to get advice on the setup from analytics experts, but make sure they understand your key milestones and overall goals.



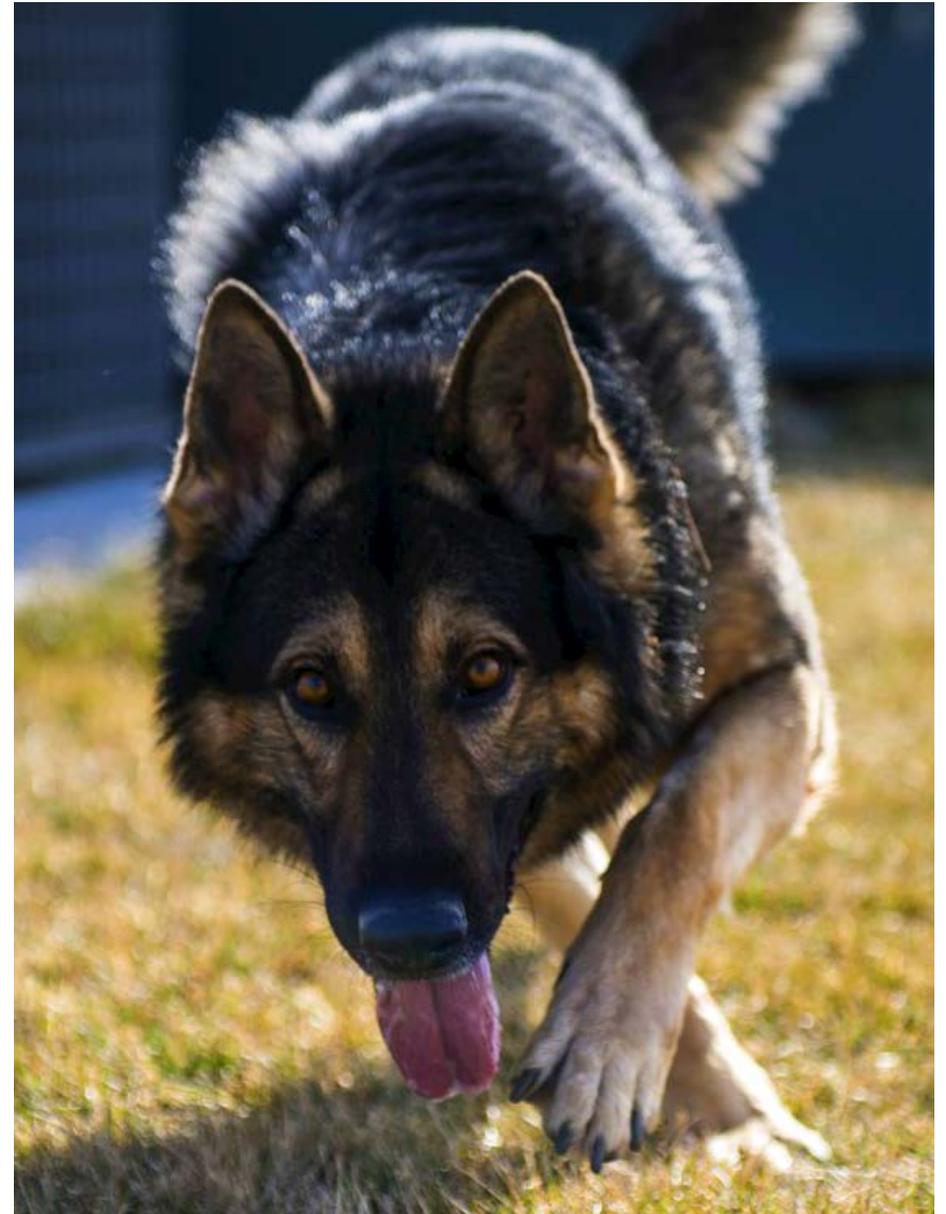
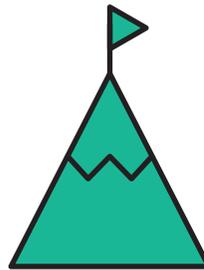
MATTERS OF TRACKING

At Axonn we work mostly with Google Analytics. Therefore we predominantly use the following two methods to track our key milestones through the website:

- **Event tracking** - Knowing what calls to action are important to your campaign's conversion and tracking how users interact with them will help you quickly monitor your content's success at encouraging clicks to your targeted pages. An example of event tracking is scroll tracking, which helps you identify how interesting your content is. Knowing that users visited the content is one thing but knowing they read it is another.

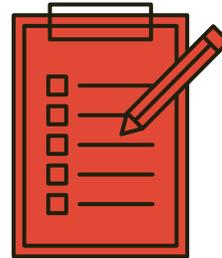


- **Setting up Goals** - Goals let you define what you think is a successful or helpful metric to track as they add context to analytical data. When you define the goal, you can analyse how well your strategy is working. Perhaps you want to see how many people read the blog articles and then went to a deeper landing page, followed by visiting the contact us page. These would be assigned steps along your goal path.



9. Review

When it comes time to reviewing the successes of your strategy, the first place you need to refer to is the strategy document. Here you have outlined what your objectives were as well as what metrics you are tracking.



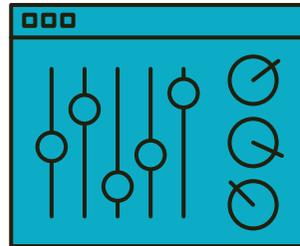
As discussed earlier, content helps your audience move through the buyer cycle, which means that each stage will have different measurements of success. For instance:

- 1. Awareness** - With this content you may see increases in traffic and perhaps a spike in increased social referrals.
- 2. Interest** - Look at metrics such as time on page or bounce rate as well as the behaviour flow to deeper content or converting landing pages.
- 3. Action** - Event tracking and goal completions help identify the users who effectively converted from the content. Using unique “contact us” phone numbers or tailored calls to action on specific pages also help measure what content is working best.
- 4. Advocacy** - Your current customers can be the best advocates for getting new ones. Social media followers, case study interactions and new testimonials are all great ways to capitalise on this. This stage combines some of the metrics found in the first three phases; however, an increase in positive, relevant links is also a great way to validate that others are talking about you in the right way.



10. Adjust

Once you have reviewed and compared what has and hasn't worked, clearly document the findings. It is important now to look for ways that you can get some quick wins by tweaking your approach.



At this stage it is best to present the findings to the key stakeholders so they understand how users are interacting with your content and therefore how the strategy may need to change.

Although we suggest monitoring the campaign monthly, it isn't advised to make radical changes before the campaign has had the chance to kick in. Little tweaks won't hurt but dramatically changing your tactics will only skew the data as you need to take into consideration elements such as:

- **Seasonality**
- **Change in the industry**
- **Campaigns by current or new competitors**
- **Delays in production or implementation in your campaign**

We typically work with quarterly campaigns, during which we may make small tweaks through the three months but wait until the end of the period to fully review and make more directional shifts.



Key takeaways

To help make it easier, here is a **SUMMARY CHECKLIST** to refer to when building your strategy:

1	Kickstart strategy discussions with ALL STAKEHOLDERS .
2	Understand overall business OBJECTIVES and agree PRIORITIES .
3	Plan according to AVAILABLE RESOURCES .
4	Start strategy document with clear reasons WHY you are undertaking it and HOW it will be implemented.
5	STRUCTURE strategy process into sections: research, analysis, planning, implementation, tracking, reviewing and adjusting.
6	REVIEW AND DOCUMENT existing content assets (perhaps using the Kraft Foods grid).
7	With this in mind, use research and analysis for NEW CONTENT IDEATION .
8	Reference the BUYER JOURNEY STAGES when considering the purpose of each piece.
9	Create an ACTION PLAN showing what needs to be produced.
10	IMPLEMENT strategy, TRACK methods and watch out for obstacles.
11	CONTINUE COLLABORATION between those implementing the strategy, ensuring clear communication and adherence to the plan.
12	Continuously MONITOR AND TRACK EFFORTS , possibly using Google Analytics Dashboards.

Need some help with your **content marketing strategy?**
Get in touch with the team today



www.axonn.media
hello@axonn.media
+44 (0)207 517 2200
[@AxonnMedia](https://www.instagram.com/AxonnMedia)

