

A night sky with the Milky Way galaxy and a lone tree on a rocky outcrop.

MEETING THE CONTENT CHALLENGE

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MEETING THE CONTENT CHALLENGE



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Does anyone reading this like being marketed to? Can't wait to read the next irrelevant brand message or be offered an untimely brand video? There's so much noise — so much unwanted content — that consumers are drowning and brands are struggling to be heard.

As Steve Lucas, head of Marketo, once told me, "We're in a very loud, global room right now, more shouting won't help." But tell that to the content teams, with their work now under the very bright shining light of ever more advanced performance analytics. They know shouting won't help, but they also know that the demand for quality content, created at incredible speed and scale, is going to keep rising.

What's more, it's no longer a question of creating an email or a blog post. Engaging videos and striking images are the best bet for grabbing attention these days, especially when your customers are meeting you in mobile channels. According to Hubspot, mobile video consumption is doubling every year. When it comes to visual content, people are more likely to remember it, and much more likely to share it.

That's even more the case, of course, if the content is personalized, relevant, and meaningful.

It's understandable if some creative teams are feeling overwhelmed. But there are lifelines out there, in the shape of innovative technologies and strategies. Automation can bear much of the load when it comes to creating content, and especially multiple variants for testing purposes. It can also help organize content assets and make them readily discoverable.

But new technologies often mean new ways of thinking about processes, and new ways of tackling projects. Systems thinking, and even agile development, can play a role here.

In this eBook, we bring these perspectives to life, and hear from thought-leaders in the field. Meeting the content challenge is a fix; it's a journey, and an unending one. Let's take a look at the current landscape.

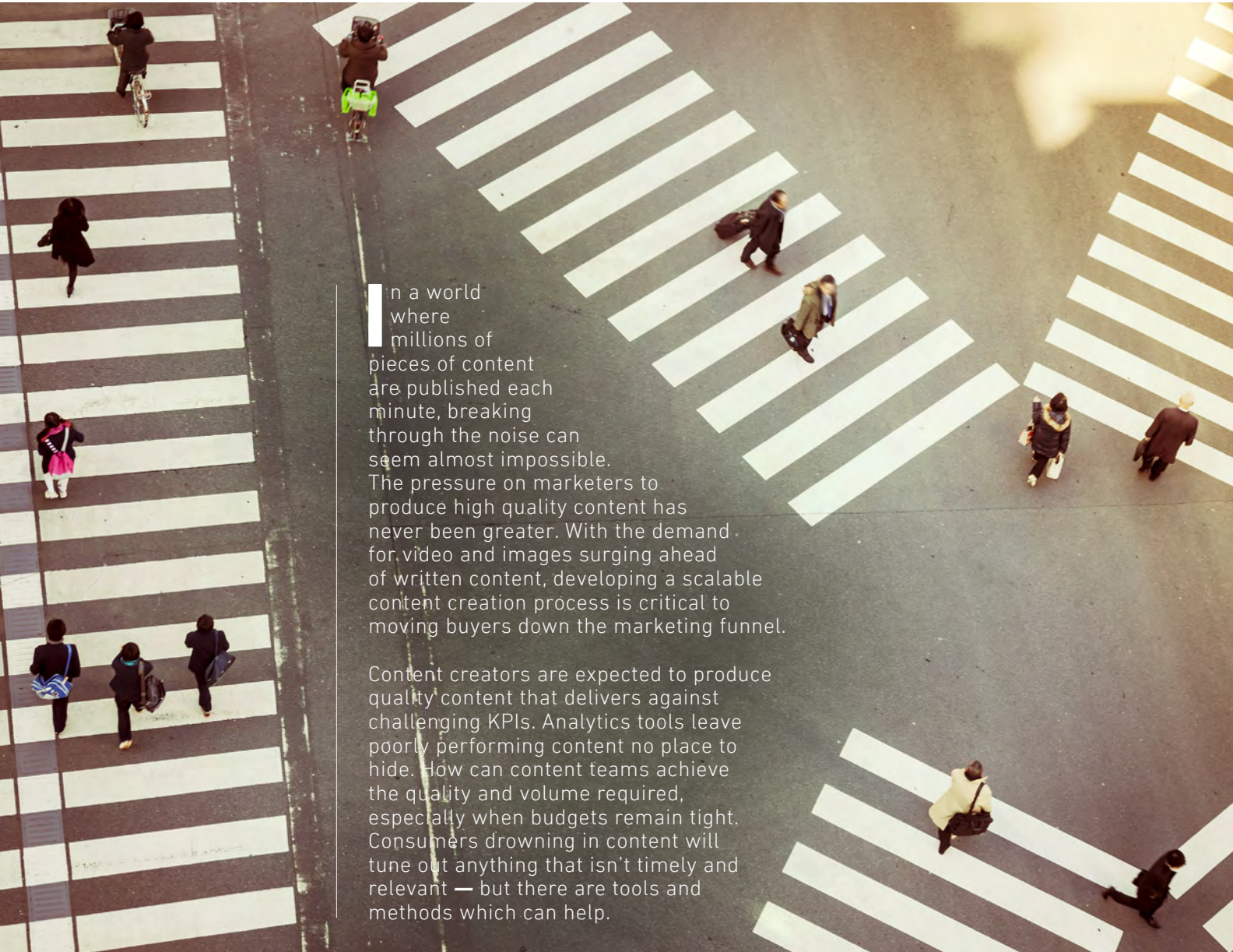
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MEETING THE CONTENT CHALLENGE

By David Pring-Mill



In a world where millions of pieces of content are published each minute, breaking through the noise can seem almost impossible. The pressure on marketers to produce high quality content has never been greater. With the demand for video and images surging ahead of written content, developing a scalable content creation process is critical to moving buyers down the marketing funnel.

Content creators are expected to produce quality content that delivers against challenging KPIs. Analytics tools leave poorly performing content no place to hide. How can content teams achieve the quality and volume required, especially when budgets remain tight. Consumers drowning in content will tune out anything that isn't timely and relevant — but there are tools and methods which can help.





GETTING VISUAL

Brands are pursuing the familiar but necessary goal of reaching the right people, in the right way, with the right content. Increasingly, brands are leaning on in-house creative teams to meet this steep demand for content, but most still choose to outsource their efforts, especially when it comes to video. The demand for video content has never been higher, and it won't stop growing any time soon.

According to eMarketer, by 2023, U.S. digital ad spend on video will rival TV ad spend: \$50 billion on digital ads, approaching television's \$68 billion. The massive success brands are having on Instagram confirms that audiences are now deeply invested in video and image-based messaging, especially consumed on mobile devices.



**HOW SHUTTERSTOCK MEETS THE CONTENT CHALLENGE -
PAUL COWAN IN CONVERSATION**

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Automation is essential to producing content at scale. Creative enablement technologies support personalization. At best, this means that marketers' efforts can be redirected from tedious task management to flexible, effective ideation, while creative teams can focus on what they do best.

Content repositories provide the media assets needed to quickly turn an idea into a published piece of content. By using these technologies, as well as refining the content creation process, companies can turn the content challenge into a marketing success.

CONTENT FATIGUE

Content creators are feeling overwhelmed. And so are the people who are consuming digital content. It is now routine to refer to all this excessive content as "noise." But consumers have the ability to choose what they listen to — if we couldn't, conversations would never happen in coffee shops or restaurants. When consumers complain about the so-called noise, what they're really saying is that the right processes aren't in place to find relevant value, or deliver it to the right people.

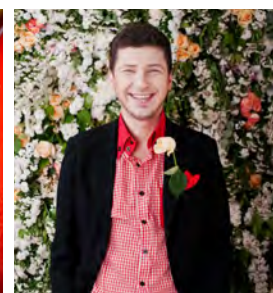
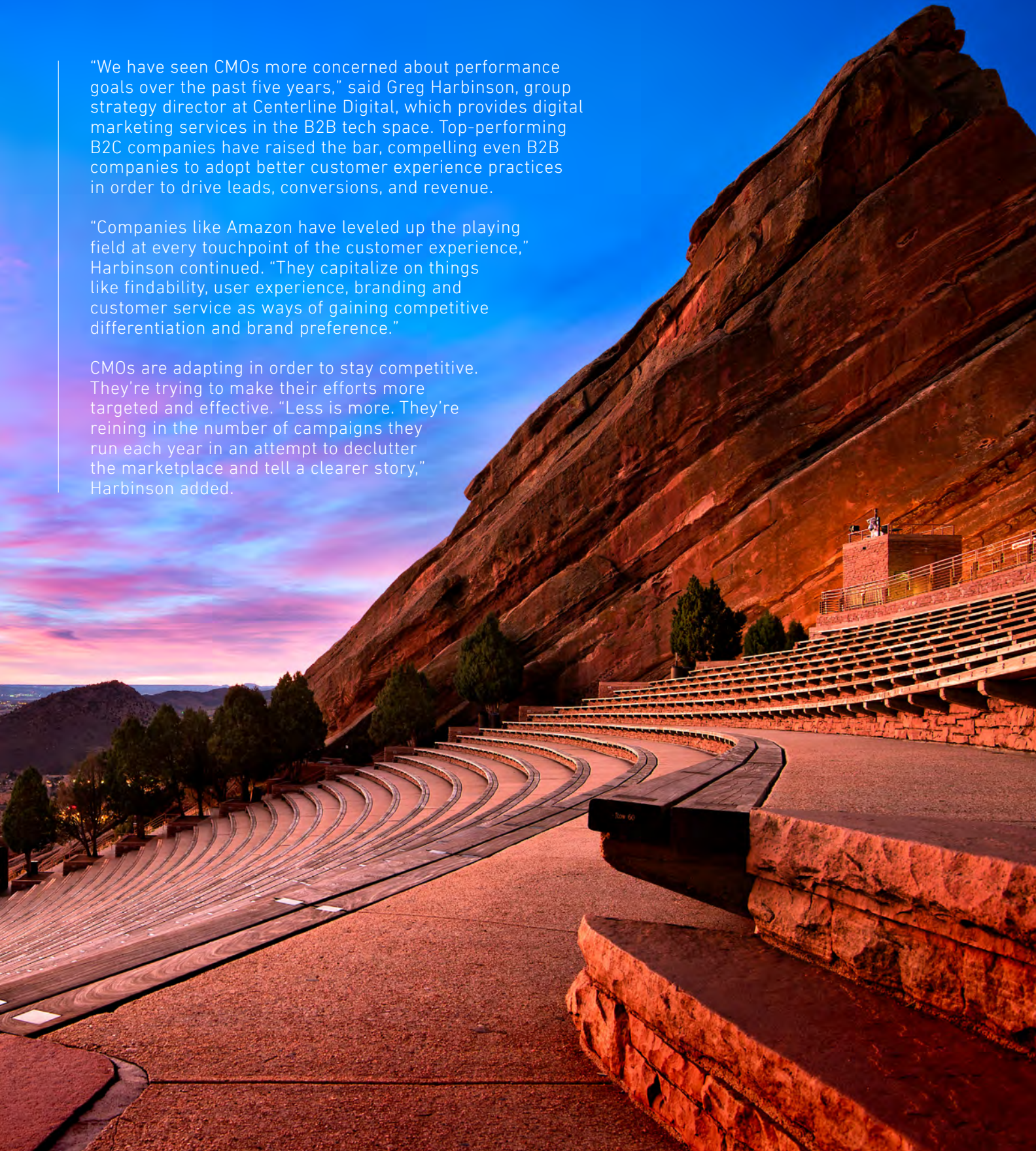
But that doesn't mean that marketers should give up on producing relevant, engaging content, and go back to spraying messages at as many people as possible. Quite the contrary. Clearly, companies think it can be done. According to a [Spiceworks 2019 State of IT Marketing report](#), 37 percent of surveyed marketers expected an increase in their budgets this year. 48 percent indicated that this budget expansion would be driven in part by customer expansion, and 45 percent mentioned increased company revenue as a factor. But 51 percent said it would stem from their organization's increased prioritization of marketing activities.

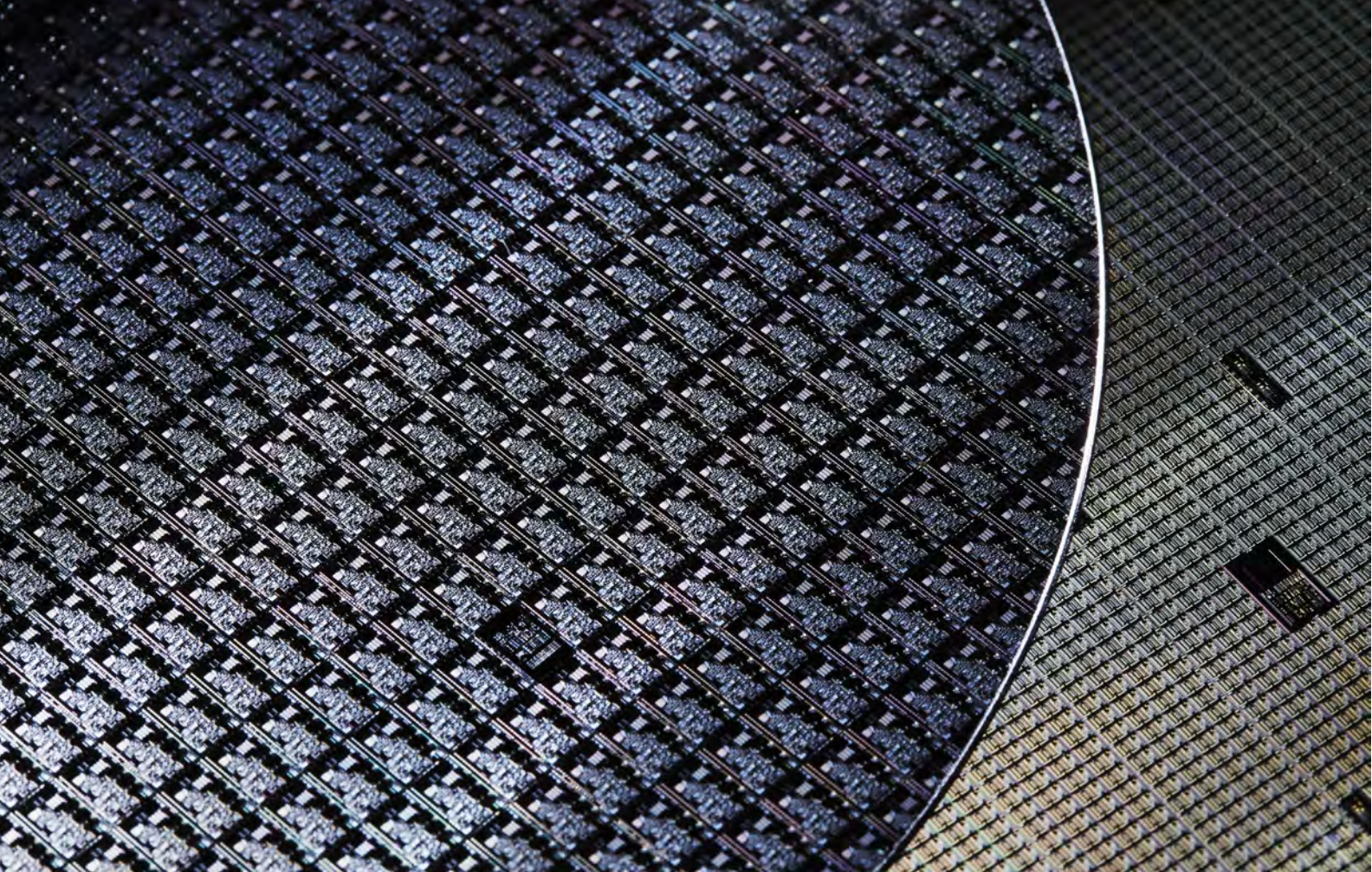
But it's still the case that the majority of marketers are expected to hit their content targets with level, or even decreasing, resources. When performance metrics make the needle so visible, no wonder there's top down direction to move it.

"We have seen CMOs more concerned about performance goals over the past five years," said Greg Harbinson, group strategy director at Centerline Digital, which provides digital marketing services in the B2B tech space. Top-performing B2C companies have raised the bar, compelling even B2B companies to adopt better customer experience practices in order to drive leads, conversions, and revenue.

"Companies like Amazon have leveled up the playing field at every touchpoint of the customer experience," Harbinson continued. "They capitalize on things like findability, user experience, branding and customer service as ways of gaining competitive differentiation and brand preference."

CMOs are adapting in order to stay competitive. They're trying to make their efforts more targeted and effective. "Less is more. They're reining in the number of campaigns they run each year in an attempt to declutter the marketplace and tell a clearer story," Harbinson added.





TECHNOLOGY CAN HELP

...with testing at scale, with creative enablement solutions, and with sophisticated content repositories.

A/B TESTING OR A-Z TESTING?

A/B testing is an established part of the content creation process. But with the need to create relevant content for multiple personas or segments, it's starting to look a more like A-Z testing, especially where the creation of multiple content variants can be automated.

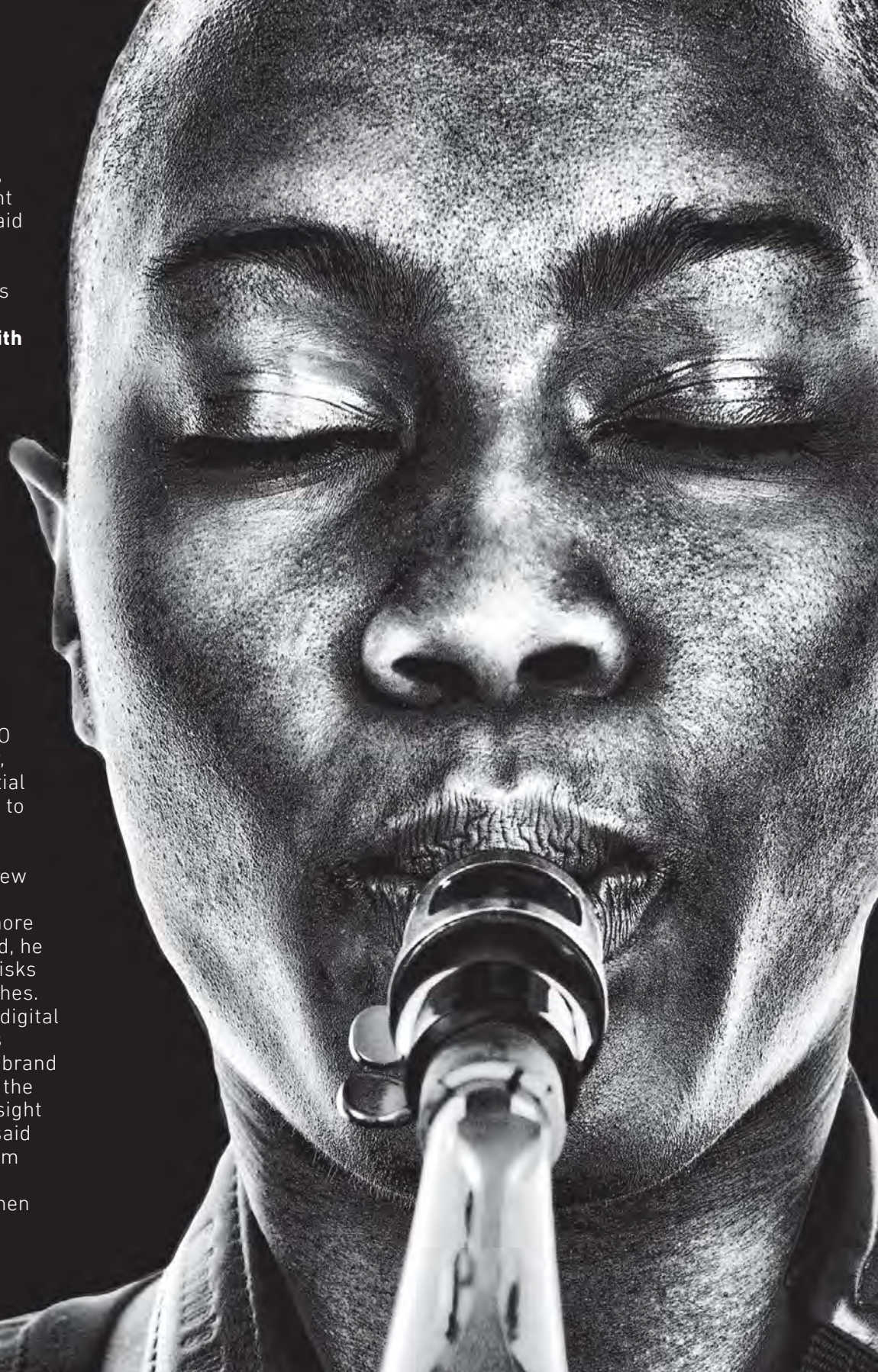
Can there be too much testing? Greg Harbinson told me, "While there are many companies that do exhaustive testing, we tend to see more of a need from our B2B clients to test a smaller set of variables in order to drive more focused campaigns. Things like testing creative concepts early on in the process to see which resonates the best."

A deep well of organized and easily retrievable media assets can be used to create content fast, and test multiple variants — but it really goes beyond that. According to Paul Cowan, VP of marketing at [Shutterstock Custom](#), there are many reasons to vary content besides testing. Marketers need to create content that is well-suited for their different channels. They need to appeal to different segments. They need to localize their content for regional marketing efforts and regional channels. Channel authenticity compounds the need for different types of content. Testing is just a layer on top of that.

For the modern marketer, being able to scale content production is essential, said Cowan, and large content repositories and custom content platforms address this urgent need. **It's all about striking a chord with a person who matters to your business.**

"If you believe that humans make decisions based on logic and feelings, one way to evoke feelings is to make a better digital experience and that will get them to feel better about you, connect with you on an emotional level, want to work with you, want to buy from you, and want to talk about you," suggested CEO Simon Berg. His company, Ceros, offers an experiential content creation platform to marketers and designers.

Although Berg said that new technologies have made digital experiences feel more meaningful and connected, he conceded that there are risks to current digital approaches. The innate trackability of digital content and digital assets sometimes encourages a brand to test excessively; but in the process, they might lose sight of a core objective. Berg said that it's better to start from some instinctual creative domain knowledge, and then work from there.





ANALYSIS PARALYSIS

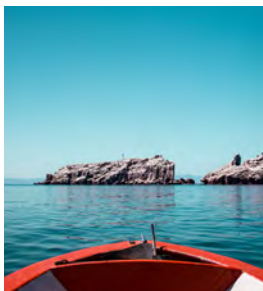
Paul Cowan has over 15 years of experience in brand marketing. He remembers the ubiquity of the term “big data” around the 2010, and thinks that people are now jaded by that jargon. But it’s still true that too much data can conjure up analysis paralysis and handcuff creatives with uninspiring or misleading numbers.

“The way I look at it is that data measurement is a tool to help with guidance but ultimately marketers need to make choices that will align to budgets and, most importantly, their strategy,” he said.

Although the scale of available data might be overwhelming for content creators, it is at the foundation of many transformative technologies. Those technologies don’t work without it.

THE RIGHT TOOLS

The need for content is reflected in the numbers that chart the size and growth of related software. According to Statistics Market Research Consulting, the market for content marketing



software was already massive in 2017, at \$3.2 billion. And it was expected to grow at a rate of 20 percent CAGR to \$17 billion by 2026.

"There have been pretty good strides in tools to help optimize media placements and channel placements," said Cowan. He cited Facebook's own optimization tools and the large ecosystem of marketing tech tools.

"But creative is kind of that last faction, that last stronghold," he said. There, tools have yielded a limited amount of data-driven insights. "It still remains a really subjective area when it comes to making decisions."

He continued, "I'm really looking forward to a day where we could use data to help codify the creative process and provide more data insight into predicting what creative will work well."

In this ideal future, marketers would rely on tools that break down creative into different variables. That way, they will be able to see the exact things within their imagery and videos that are resonating most.

But in the present era, the job of marketing can still feel difficult. With production timelines becoming truncated, people need the right tools to find assets even faster. Effective search and recommendation features can be critical. Marketing technologies often look at patterns of behavior, in personalized ways and across segments.

Randy Wootton is CEO of Percolate, a vendor which offers campaign orchestration and content alignment, and advocates a "systems thinking" approach to transforming the content creation process. "You've got this conversation unfolding with people, this back-and-forth," he said. "You need to be able to create real-time campaigns. You need to be able to respond to situations. It just feels as if the pace and pattern of marketing, as evidenced in social, is changing radically."

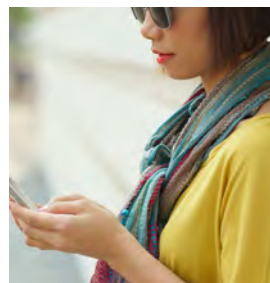


MOBILE AND VIDEO: MADE FOR EACH OTHER.

Ceros CEO Simon Berg told me that the smartphone has produced a major impact on digital marketing. "It impacts all forms," said Berg. "Writing stories, producing videos, recording sounds, sharing. There hasn't been anything else like it, beyond social media being the connector."

Mobile video has taken off, because it can be so readily consumed, any time and any place. But that goes along with famously shrinking attention spans: to grab attention, the content must be irresistible. "You can find a bite-sized moment of time in people's days and use it to connect with them," said Berg.

It's not just video. Virtual reality and augmented reality are poised to become increasingly relevant as brands seek to offer interactive experiences. Creative enablement technologies can be used to leverage rapid and customized music creation.





THINKING ABOUT PROCESS

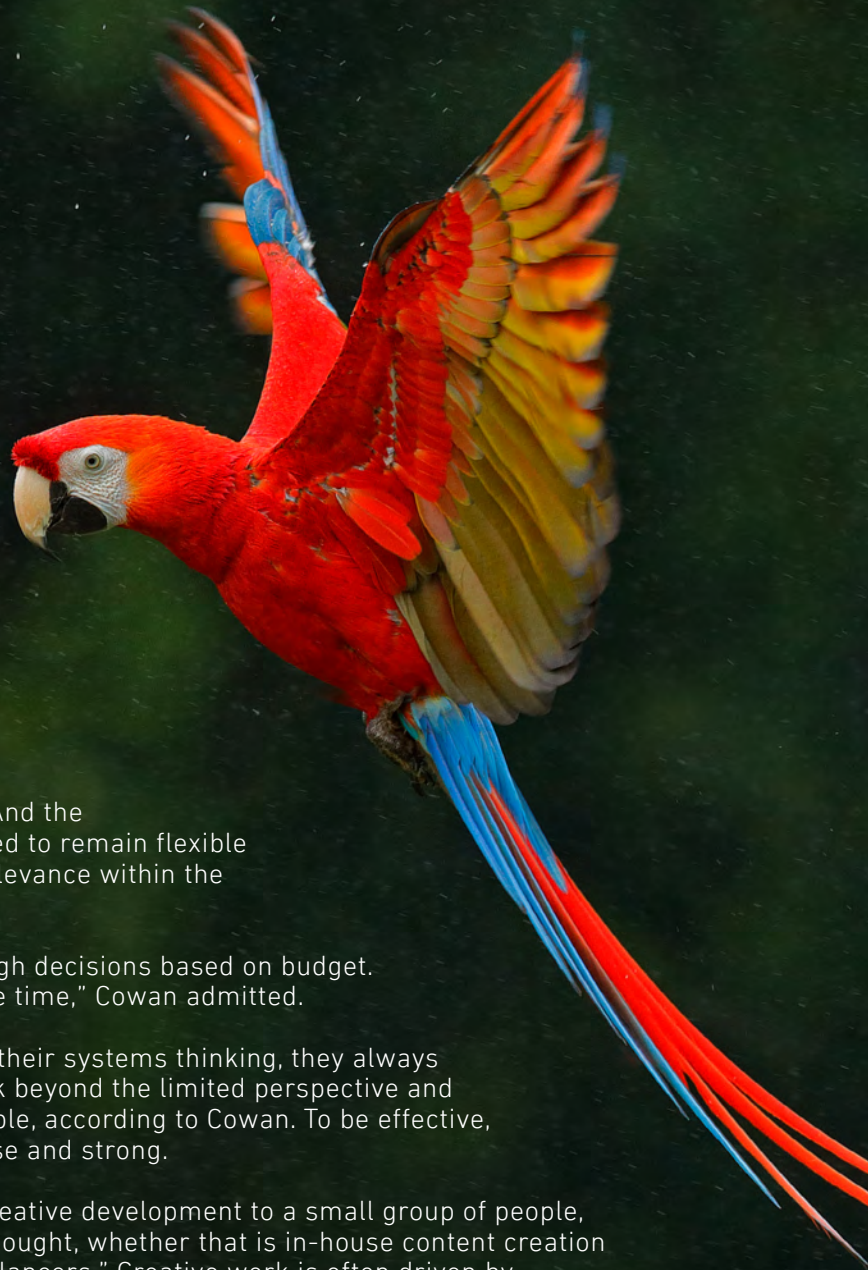
It's not just about choosing the right technologies. Changing the way your content teams organize themselves and think about their processes can have a major impact.

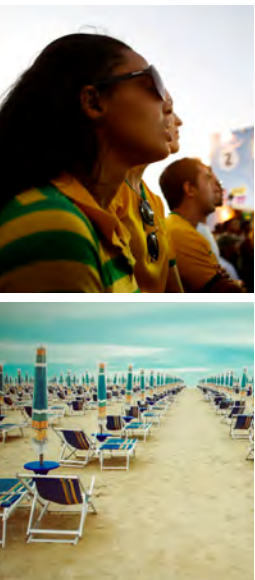
Marketers need to have content that is quickly responsive to user interactions. And the organizations around marketers also need to remain flexible to change. It's an issue of maintaining relevance within the boundaries of an industry and a budget.

"Marketers will always have to make tough decisions based on budget. And marketers can't do everything all the time," Cowan admitted.

When businesses are trying to fine-tune their systems thinking, they always have lots of options. But it's best to break beyond the limited perspective and subjective nature of small groups of people, according to Cowan. To be effective, they need ideas that are creatively diverse and strong.

He said, "Any time that we restrict our creative development to a small group of people, it creates an echo chamber of creative thought, whether that is in-house content creation or whether that is using agencies or freelancers." Creative work is often driven by brand voice, personas, the key needs of those personas, or other creative constructs and factors. Flexible approaches make all of that easier, and stock content plus custom content often makes it possible.





After all, even the business of supplying stock content has changed.

“Our business has evolved from supplying stock assets through a marketplace,” said Cowan. Shutterstock now represents “a global marketplace of premium contributors who can create content specific to a brand’s brief.”

The effect is that businesses can lower the cost of execution and ideate quickly. Marketers can simultaneously sculpt an attractive visual identity and codify brand guidelines.

“The key thing is to operationalize everything and make sure that their business practices are supporting their key strategies,” said Cowan.

SYSTEMS THINKING

Systems thinking is a holistic approach to problem-solving which seeks to understand how the various elements of a system interact and operate together. More than just breaking down silos between business functions, it looks for the connections between each moving part of a business process — marketing, for example. Systems within systems: marketing as part of the business, the business as part of a commercial environment, and so on. Although its roots are diffuse, systems thinking has an obvious affinity with engineering.

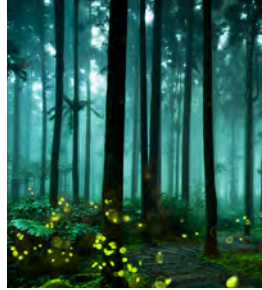
Marketers are increasingly driven to consider systems thinking because of the exponentially increasing complexity of the marketing space. Product introductions, disposable income, available marketing channels, companies going global in just few years — these are just a few areas in which there have been exponential changes — while marketing budgets have generally remained flat or declined.

Some strategies look good on paper but are quickly complicated by executional realities. Everyone is striving for quality but even that is an elusive metric.

“Quality is a very interesting debate, in terms of, what is quality? And is high quality any better than low quality? It really boils down to the entertainment factor,” said Cowan.

In spite of the rise of creative enablement technologies, and the increasing ability to improve, personalize, and adapt content, some executives are still resistant to change. Reluctance to change is normal, but as consumers’ expectations change with shifting technology, marketers must find a way to get their message across in shorter bursts to compete with a shortening attention span.





AUGMENTED REALITY AND VIRTUAL REALITY

Retailers are relying more and more on Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality to create unique, innovative, and often interactive engagement. Creating an immersive experience for the consumer, can help them to imagine how a product would fit into their life.

As more and more purchases are made online, it's possible to imagine VR in particular becoming a regular part of the customer journey. Not everyone can go to a store, and looking at something in a showroom doesn't always communicate the necessary information a buyer needs. For example, when shopping for furniture, AR can help determine if a color or style of a particular piece complements or clashes with home decor.



But it can be done. With the right tools in place, and the right strategies to deploy, marketers can transform disinterested third parties into riveted potential customers who need to find out more.

Randy Wootton: "Our most successful customers are new heads of marketing, and new heads of communication, who come in and say, effectively, I want to move from waterfall marketing to agile marketing. I want small teams who are able to focus on specific personas or specific situations and specific products, and put those together in a really compelling way and really quickly. But I want a system to help me understand what's going on. Because if you have a bunch of agile marketing, but you don't have a system that enables that, such as technology, process, governance — then you're doing random acts of marketing."

AGILE TEAMS

Agile teams? They're not just for DevOps. Forward thinking marketing departments, like the one at software giant CA Technologies, have tested agile against the traditional approach, and found it to be a winner. Cameron Van Orman, SVP of product and solution marketing: "We had groups that were running agile, and groups that weren't; so we could compare them. Literally one day there were two meetings happening across the hallway from each other. On the west side was an agile delivery group, a cross-functional team doing quarterly big-room planning; all the constituents in the room together, getting aligned on initiatives, breaking into their scrum teams, visualizing and sequencing the work, and mapping dependencies."

On the other side: "A standard product marketing team — one of my teams — having a second-half planning meeting. Both meetings were facilitated by agile coaches. Both teams had the same agile accoutrements — what I call Play-Doh and pipe cleaners. They looked identical from the outside. But the non-agile team had a hard time being able to commit to business impact." What they offered, in fact, was a list of needs and questions: "A bunch of actions to go talk to other departments."

As for the agile team: "They were empowered to make decisions, and they exited the meeting that day on a plan they were all committed to, including how they would sequence the work and what the risks and dependencies were.

That was a pivotal moment for me. One team was truly agile. They had empowered people who were able to align around a goal, and sequence the work to get it done. The other team was playing agile."

In a second example, seven teams worked simultaneously on a campaign. Only one was an agile team. It started the project furthest behind; but it finished first. "They finished best, they were easily twice as fast bringing their campaign to market, and they had the best quality."



PULLING IT ALL TOGETHER:

TAKEAWAYS FOR THE MARKETER.

1. Be relevant at scale
2. Expect mobile to continue to grow
3. Prioritize your visual content strategy
4. Leverage creative enablement solutions
5. Find out more about systems thinking and agile teams





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