Enhancing the Buyer's Journey:
Benchmarks for Content & The Buyer's Journey

June 2014

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Content marketing is a brilliant strategy. Organizations of all sizes are recognizing that content is the best way to influence buyers during their journey from need realization to purchase decision. **In fact, Demand Metric's** Lead Generation Benchmark Report **for 2014 reveals that content marketing is the top area for investment over the next 12 months.**

As a strategy, content marketing isn't new, but it has certainly come into its own as an approach to influence customers across their entire journey. This influence is especially seen at the beginning of the journey, when they are self-educating and out of view of the vendors that could provide them with the solutions they seek. **So from an adoption perspective, content marketing is now mainstream, and most organizations have some sort of content initiative in place.**

Marketers have witnessed an evolution in content marketing formats. **It's still said that "content is king", but many marketers are observing growing signs of content fatigue.** Even a brilliantly written and beautifully designed white paper must now take its place alongside thousands, even millions of others. Static content is increasingly failing to impress, even if it performs well from an SEO perspective.

Marketers are finding that formats that used to work don't pull audience interest like they once did. The content clutter that is producing content fatigue is causing marketers to innovate with new forms of content, and the common denominator of what works best is engagement. Any content that stimulates engagement with a member of the target audience is far more effective and influential than content that doesn't.

In a study sponsored by ion interactive, Demand Metric conducted a survey to explore how effectively marketers are using content to influence the buyer's journey.

INTRODUCTION

Most marketers agree that using content is an important factor in influencing a customers journey, but how effective are these content strategies? In turn, marketers also question what things are producing the greatest audience engagement and success? Answers to these questions were pursued to better understand the current lead generation process:

- What does the buyer's journey look like today?

- How well does content engage and educate the audience, and differentiate them from competition?

- What stages of the buying process is content most and least effective?

- How passive or interactive is the content marketers are currently deploying?

- What are the current problems with content marketing and the barriers to greater success?

- What process changes would produce the greatest benefit?

- What percent of budget is allocated to content creation and marketing?

- How is content marketing effectiveness measured?

These study results provide insights and data useful for comparison, planning and improving the content marketing process.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Primary research for this study was done using a survey, and the data analysis provides these key findings:

- **During their journey, only 25% of buyers reveal their interest to vendors early in that journey.** 90% of study participants believe that it is somewhat or very important to engage buyers earlier in their journey (compared to status quo).

- 25% of study participants rated their content as slightly or very interactive, 39% rated it at a moderate level for engagement, and 36% rated their content as somewhat or very passive.

- **Interactive content, such as apps, assessments, calculators, configurators and quizzes, generate conversions moderately or very well 70% of the time, compared to just 36% for passive content.**

- Comparing interactive to passive content, interactive content is somewhat or very effective at educating the buyer (93% versus 70%), differentiating from competitors (88% versus 55%) and being shared (38% versus 17%).

- **The most frequently encountered problem with content marketing efforts is "content doesn't create enough opportunities for interaction and engagement", experienced by 58% of study participants.**

- 17% of study participants have no content effectiveness measurements in place, and 49% are using only basic metrics such as clicks or downloads.

- **55% of organizations in this study are allocating 15% or less of their marketing budgets to content creation and marketing.** The study found no relationship between increased spending on content and increased content effectiveness.

This report details the results and insights from the analysis of the study data. For more detail on the survey participants, refer to the Appendix.

Figure 1: *Only a quarter of buyers reveal themselves to vendors early in their journey.*

When Buyers Reveal Themselves to Vendors

Customer & The Buyer's Journey Benchmark Report, Demand Metric, June 2014, n=185
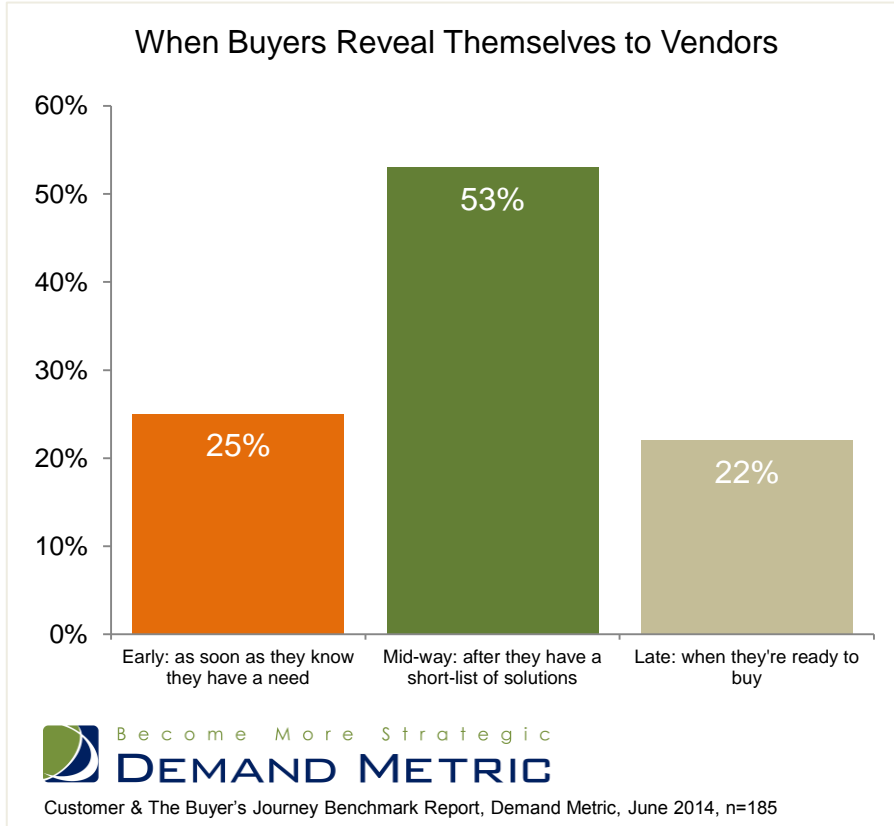
It is generally accepted in the marketing community that buyers are increasingly self-educating deeper into the sales cycle than before.

By choice, buyers remain hidden, using the plethora of online resources and content to move themselves much farther down the purchase consideration path before revealing their interest to vendors. **The obvious challenge for vendors is they have less time to influence the purchase decision through direct interaction.**

This phenomenon of longer duration buyer self-education is a main reason why content marketing is so widely adopted. This study looked at the current situation with respect to when buyers reveal themselves to vendors during their journey (Figure 1).

This data is a snapshot of the current situation. **Anecdotal information suggests that the trend will continue and worsen; buyers will disclose their interest to vendors later and later in the buying process.**

Figure 2: 90% of study participants attach some level of importance to influencing buyers earlier in their journey than is currently occurring.

Importance of Influencing Buyers Early

Customer & The Buyer's Journey Benchmark Report, Demand Metric, June 2014, n=185
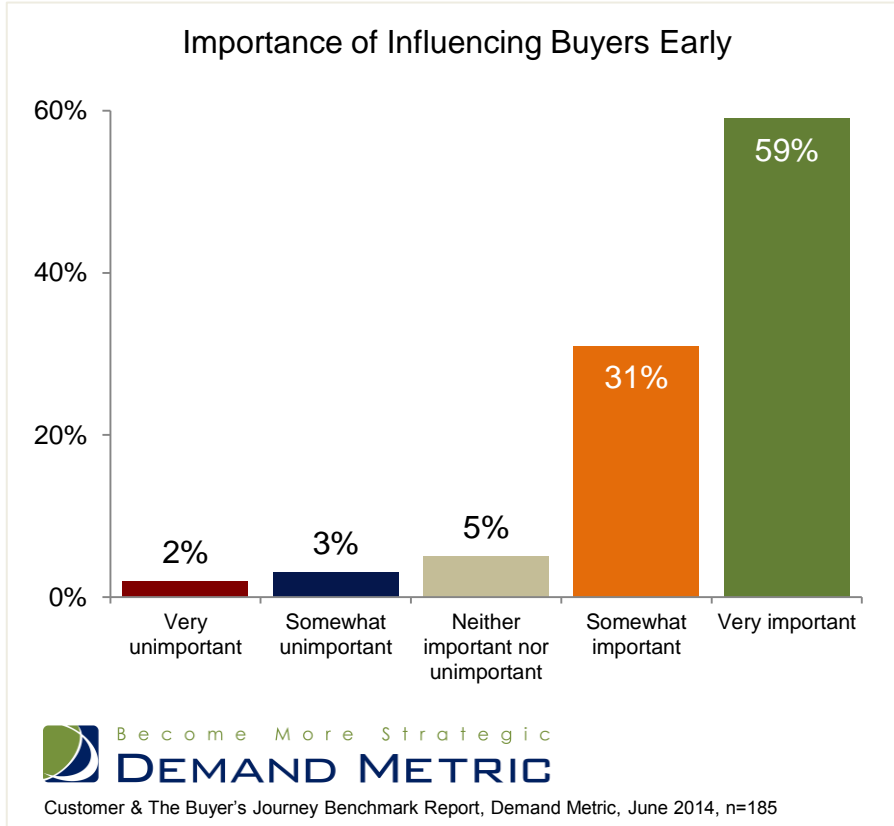
What is the current belief in the marketing community about the importance of influencing buyers earlier in their journey? Study participants rated this importance as shown in *Figure 2.*

Almost 60% of study participants indicated it was very important to influence buyers earlier in their journey (than what is currently occurring). There's no surprise in this data – it supports the instincts of every sales and marketing professional.
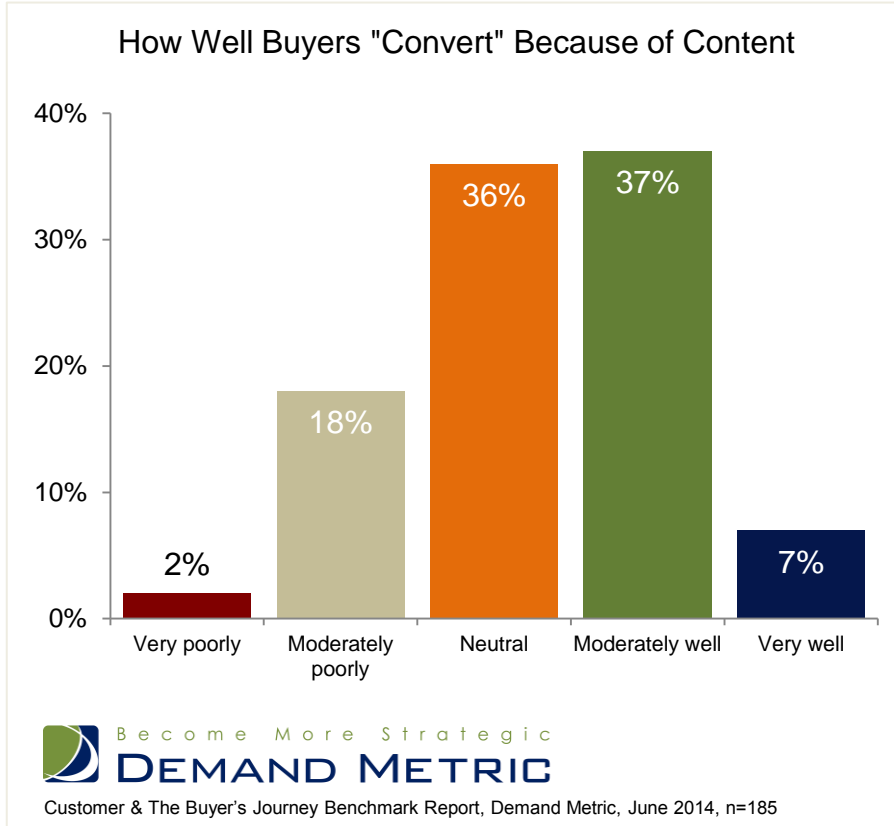
Access to online content has given the buyer the advantage in their journey, and most marketers understand this. Marketers have responded by engaging in a content "arms race" resulting in a frenzy of content production and publishing activity. The sought-after result is to get the attention of buyers during their initial search for information, and the strategy has worked well for many organizations.

"Content is king" has been the mantra of many marketers, *but is it still?* When it comes to content, the era of "if you build it, they will come" is coming to an end. **The effectiveness of content marketing is no longer improved by simply pumping out more content.**

CONTENT PERFORMANCE

Figure 3: *44% of study participants report that buyers respond moderately or very well to content, "converting" or responding to it in the desired way.*

How Well Buyers "Convert" Because of Content

Customer & The Buyer's Journey Benchmark Report, Demand Metric, June 2014, n=185

Today it's not enough to just publish content, even if it's good content. It if doesn't get consumed by the buyer and influence or directly cause a conversion to occur, the content is of little value.

This study asked a series of questions to determine how content is performing within the customer journey. The first question posed the effectiveness of content in terms of conversion rates.

One of the primary research goals of this study was to determine the relationship between content type and effectiveness.

Passive content was defined as that which stimulates little or no engagement. This content is generally static, such as a text-based whitepaper.

Interactive content was defined as that which invites or requires some level of interaction or engagement. Examples of interactive content provided to survey participants included wizards, configurators, assessments, quizzes, calculators, games and more.

CONTENT PERFORMANCE

Content Type Rating

Customer & The Buyer's Journey Benchmark Report, Demand Metric, June 2014, n=185
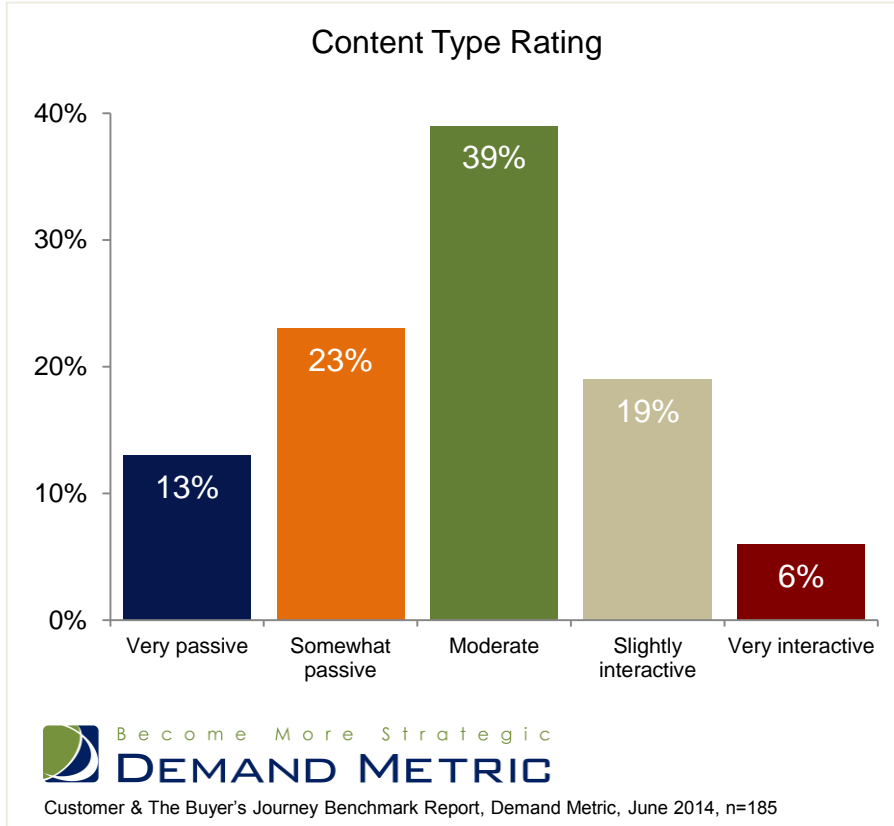
To determine the relationship between content type and effectiveness, participants were first asked to categorize their content as either passive or interactive, and the following category options were provided for this rating:

- **Very passive:** content produces little or no engagement with the buyer

- **Somewhat passive:** content produces slight engagement with the buyer

- **Moderate:** content produces some level of engagement with the buyer

- **Slightly interactive:** content produces measurable engagement with the buyer

- **Very interactive:** content produces highly engaging experience with the buyer

The results of this content type rating are presented in *Figure 4*. **This division of content into passive and interactive categories became the most valuable filter though which to analyze and view other data collected in this study.**

CONTENT PERFORMANCE

Figure 5: Interactive content is far more effective at producing conversions.

Conversion Comparison: Passive vs. Interactive

Customer & The Buyer's Journey Benchmark Report, Demand Metric, June 2014, n=185
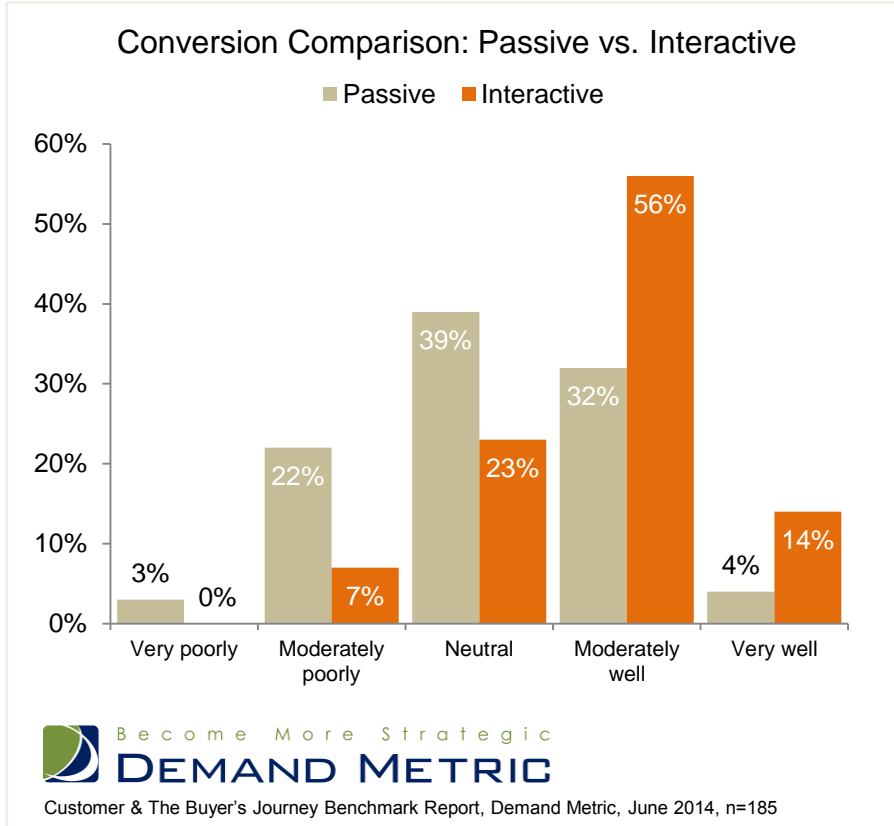
For the analysis that follows, responses to the content rating question were grouped into two broad categories:

- **The passive content category**, which includes the "very passive", "somewhat passive" and "moderate" responses

- **The interactive content category**, which includes the "slightly interactive" and "very interactive" responses.

Using these categories for further analysis yielded some valuable insights, beginning with the impact of these two content type categories on conversion, as presented in *Figure 5*.
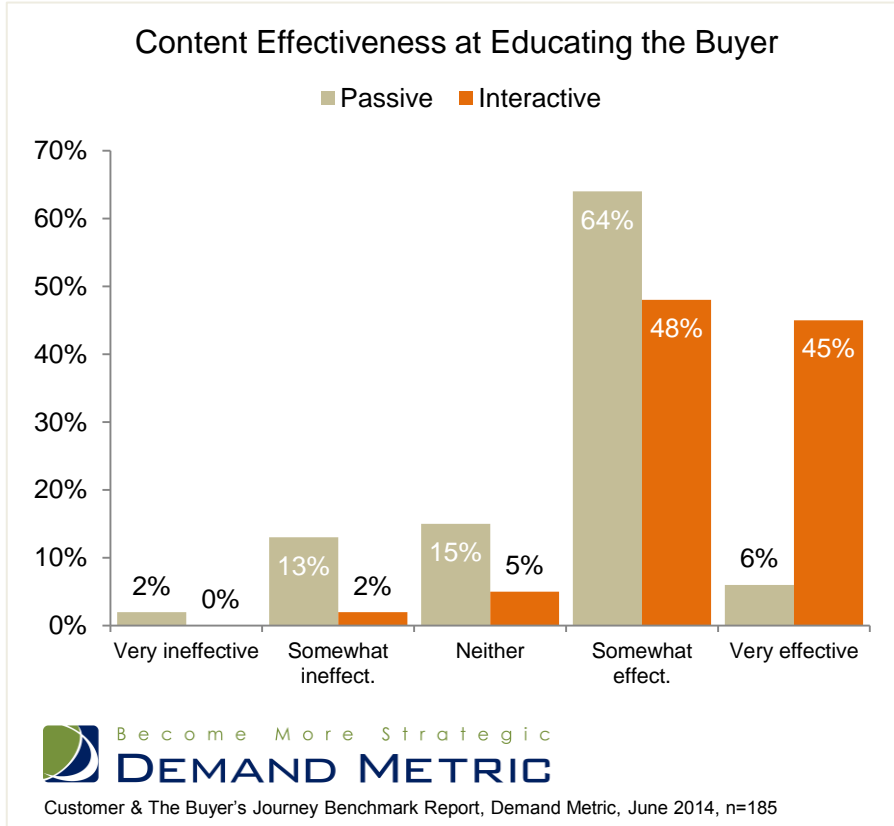
The difference between the performance of passive versus interactive content at producing conversions is dramatic.

In this study, interactive content converted buyers moderately or very well 70% of the time, compared to just 36% for passive content.

CONTENT PERFORMANCE

Figure 6: Interactive content is far more effective at educating buyers.

Content Effectiveness at Educating the Buyer

■ Passive ■ Interactive

Category	Passive	Interactive
Very ineffective	2%	0%
Somewhat ineffect.	13%	2%
Neither	15%	5%
Somewhat effect.	64%	48%
Very effective	6%	45%

Customer & The Buyer's Journey Benchmark Report, Demand Metric, June 2014, n=185

While producing a conversion is usually the primary goal of content marketing, other important goals exist as well.

Using this same passive/interactive content filtering categorization, other content goals were examined and presented in *Figure 6*.
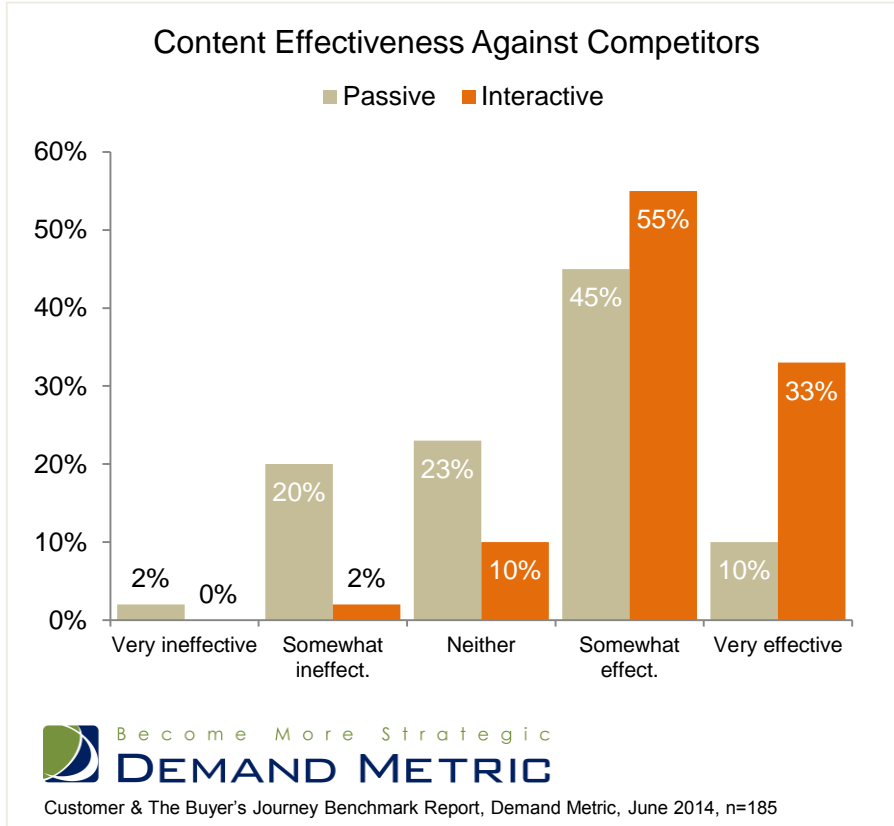
The study results clearly indicate that interactive content does a much better job of educating the buying audience, as 93% of study participants reported interactive content as somewhat or very effective in this role.

In contrast, only 70% of passive content users reported the same level of effectiveness.

CONTENT PERFORMANCE

Figure 7: Interactive content is better at differentiating from competitors.

Content Effectiveness Against Competitors

Legend: ■ Passive ■ Interactive

Category	Passive	Interactive
Very ineffective	2%	0%
Somewhat ineffect.	20%	2%
Neither	23%	10%
Somewhat effect.	45%	55%
Very effective	10%	33%

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The comparison for how well these types of content help differentiate the content owner from its competitors was also examined (*Figure 7*).
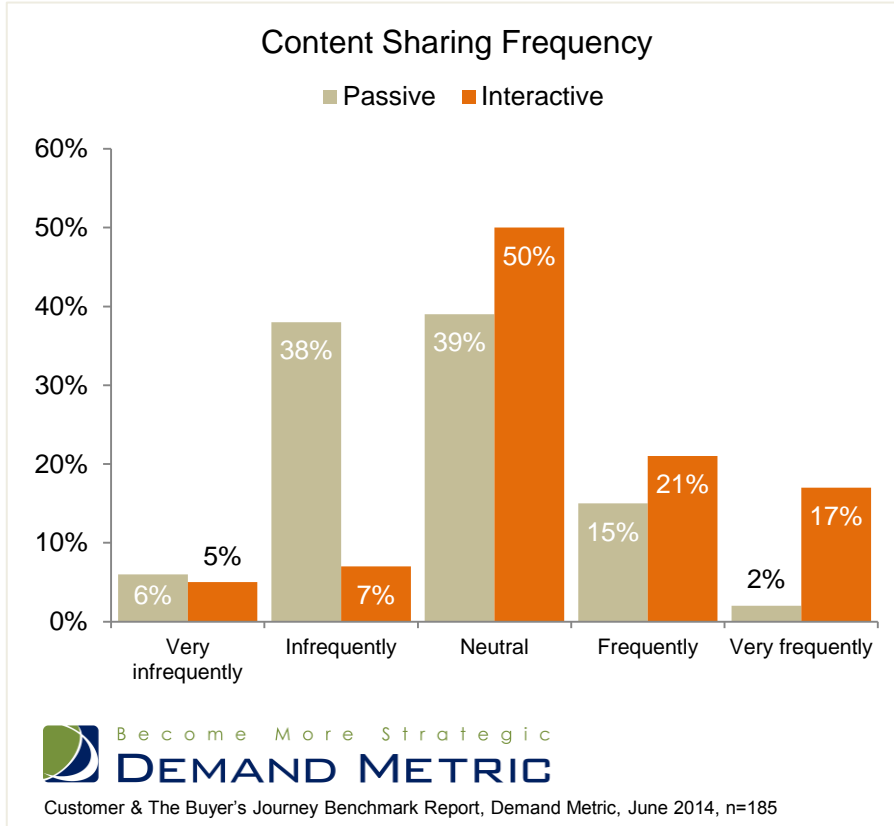
Just as interactive content was more effective in educating potential buyers, interactive content is also more effective in helping differentiate the content publisher from its competitors.

88% of interactive content users report it is somewhat or very effective at differentiating, while 55% of passive content users report the same level of effectiveness.

CONTENT PERFORMANCE

Figure 8: Interactive content is shared more often than passive content.

Content Sharing Frequency

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An important indicator of content value is the frequency at which it is shared. All content creators hope that their content is not just found, but is useful, valuable or insightful to those consumers so they are inspired to share it. There is a marked difference in how passive and interactive content is shared.

If sharing of content is of primary importance, then once again interactive content has the advantage, with **over one-third of study participants reporting their interactive content is frequently or very frequently shared.** Just 17% of passive content is shared with this frequency.

Each of the comparisons examined in this section confirm what most marketers would believe about the differences between passive and interactive content. The data clearly shows that interactive content produces more conversions, educates buyers more effectively, creates better competitive differentiation and is more widely shared.

These results indicate that a modification to the mantra is in order: "interactive content is king."

BUYING STAGE CONTENT EFFECTIVENESS

Figure 9: By a slight margin, content is most effective in the middle stage of the buyer's journey.

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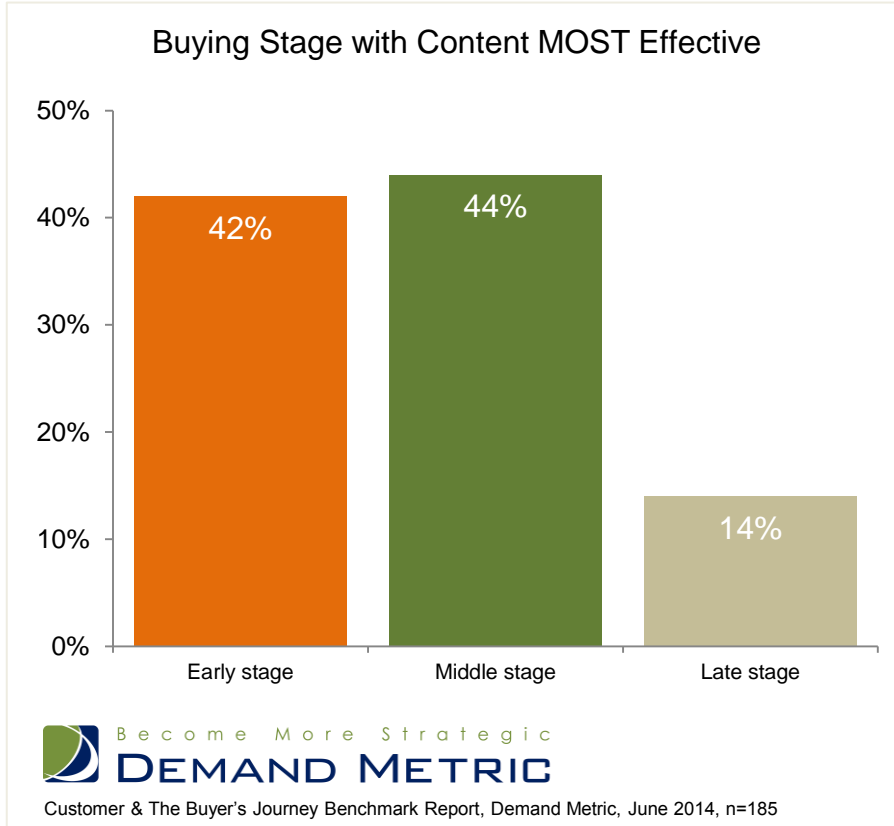
As content marketing has evolved, marketers have given more thought to how to best deploy content across various stages of the buyer's journey.

In which stage of the buyer's journey is content most and least effective?

The study asked questions to find out. The stages used in this research were:

- **Early stage:** when buyers become aware of their need and begin the process of discovering solutions.

- **Middle stage:** when buyers begin purchase consideration of solution alternatives.

- **Late stage:** when buyers have enough information and are ready to make a purchase decision.

Using this framework, study participants indicated the stages of the buying process in which their content was most effective. This data is presented in *Figure 9*.

BUYING STAGE CONTENT EFFECTIVENESS

Figure 10: By a considerable margin, content is least effective in the late stage of a buyer's journey.

Buying Stage with Content LEAST Effective

- Early stage: 34%
- Middle stage: 15%
- Late stage: 51%

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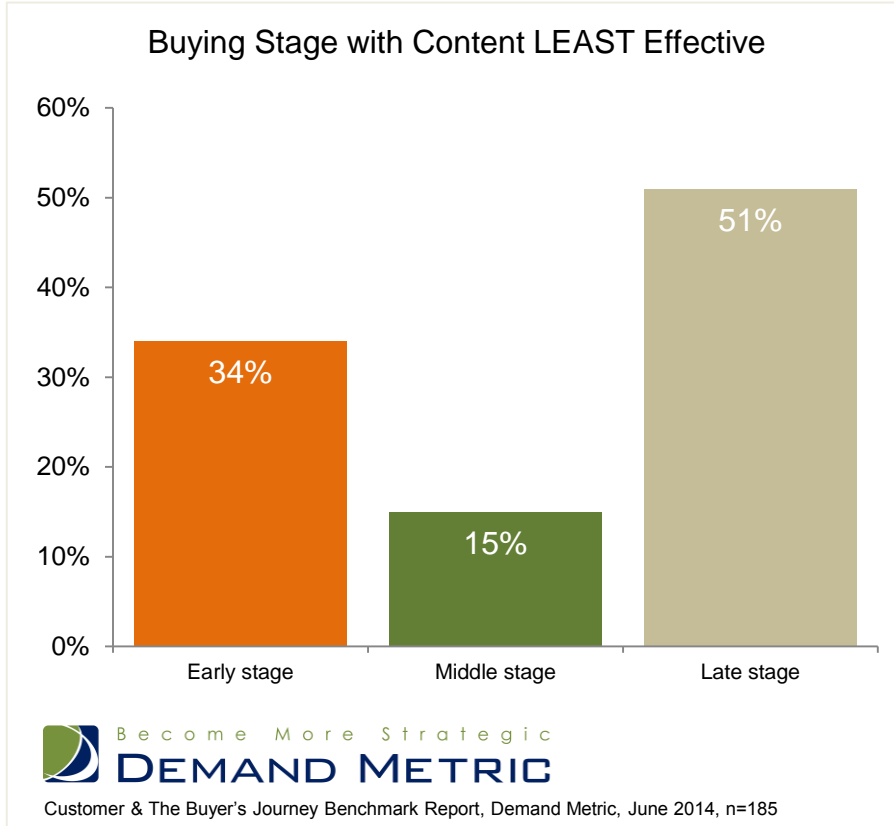
According to the data in *Figure 9* **and** *Figure 10***, content is most effective in the early and middle stages, and least effective in the late stage of the buyer's journey.**

Figure 2 (Page 7) displayed data about the importance of influencing buyers earlier in their journey. Almost all study participants – 90% – agreed this is important. **This need for earlier influence hasn't yet translated into content effectiveness across the early stage of the buyer's journey**.

Of course it is important to have effective content across all stages of the buyer's journey. However, marketers understand the power of making strong, early impressions.
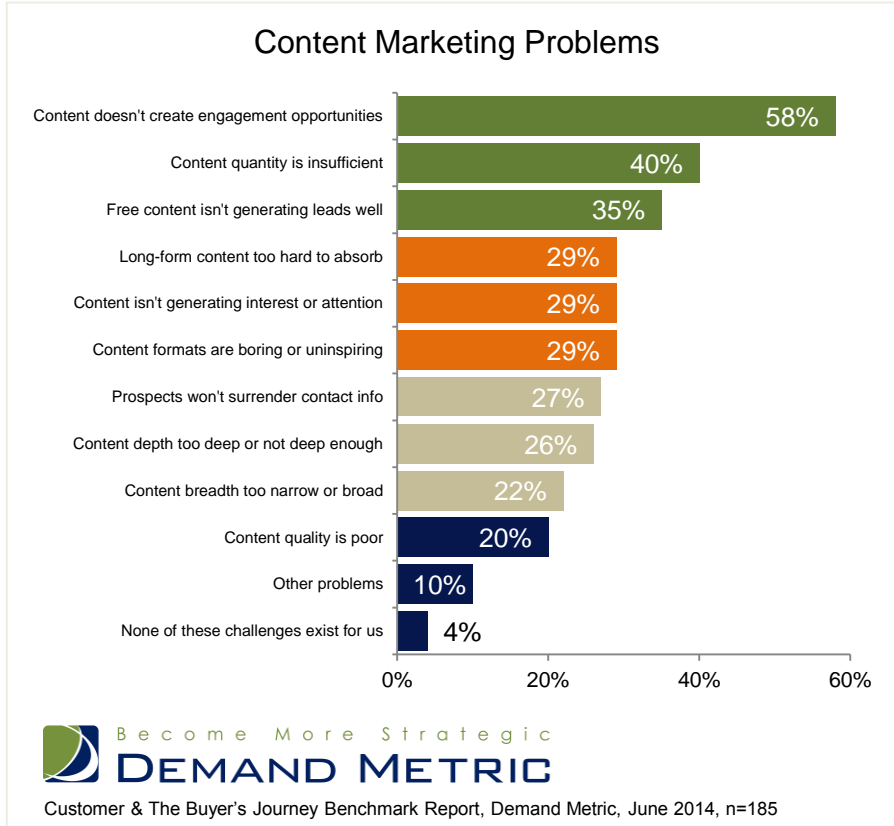
The study data suggests that content effectiveness in the early stage of the buying process isn't where it should be.

Logic would indicate that effective content in the early stage of the buying process creates momentum and an advantage in later stages. This assumption, however, was not investigated in this study.

CONTENT MARKETING PROBLEMS

Figure 11: Over half this study's participants report their content doesn't create enough interaction or engagement.

Content Marketing Problems

Problem	Percentage
Content doesn't create engagement opportunities	58%
Content quantity is insufficient	40%
Free content isn't generating leads well	35%
Long-form content too hard to absorb	29%
Content isn't generating interest or attention	29%
Content formats are boring or uninspiring	29%
Prospects won't surrender contact info	27%
Content depth too deep or not deep enough	26%
Content breadth too narrow or broad	22%
Content quality is poor	20%
Other problems	10%
None of these challenges exist for us	4%

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Like any strategy, problems can occur that limit effective execution.

Study participants were provided a list of known problems and asked to select those that they are experiencing. The responses collected are presented in *Figure 11*.

Of this list of problems, only 4% of the respondents claim not to have any of these challenges.

Only one problem area – "Content doesn't create enough opportunities for interaction and engagement" – exists for over half the survey respondents. **This most frequently reported problem is directly related to the effectiveness of content to convert, educate, differentiate and share as previously discussed in this report.**

CONTENT MARKETING PROBLEMS

Further analysis of these content marketing problems was conducted to determine to what extent, if any, the passive or interactive nature of content changed the frequency with which they are experienced. This analysis yielded four, statistically significant relationships, as seen below:

Figure 12: *Statistically valid problem relationships to content type (passive or interactive).*

Problem	Passive Content Frequency	Interactive Content Frequency
1. Content quality is poor	25%	3%
2. Content doesn't create enough opportunities for interaction and engagement.	64%	39%
3. Content formats (e.g. text-based white papers) are boring or uninspiring.	34%	15%
4. Content is not generating much interest or getting much attention.	37%	8%

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From this data, we can conclude that interactive content enjoys a quality perception advantage, produces better engagement as it's designed to do, is perceived as more interesting and is better at generating attention than passive content. These results should not surprise any marketer, instead this data should show the value associated with creating and publishing interactive content.

CONTENT MARKETING PROBLEMS

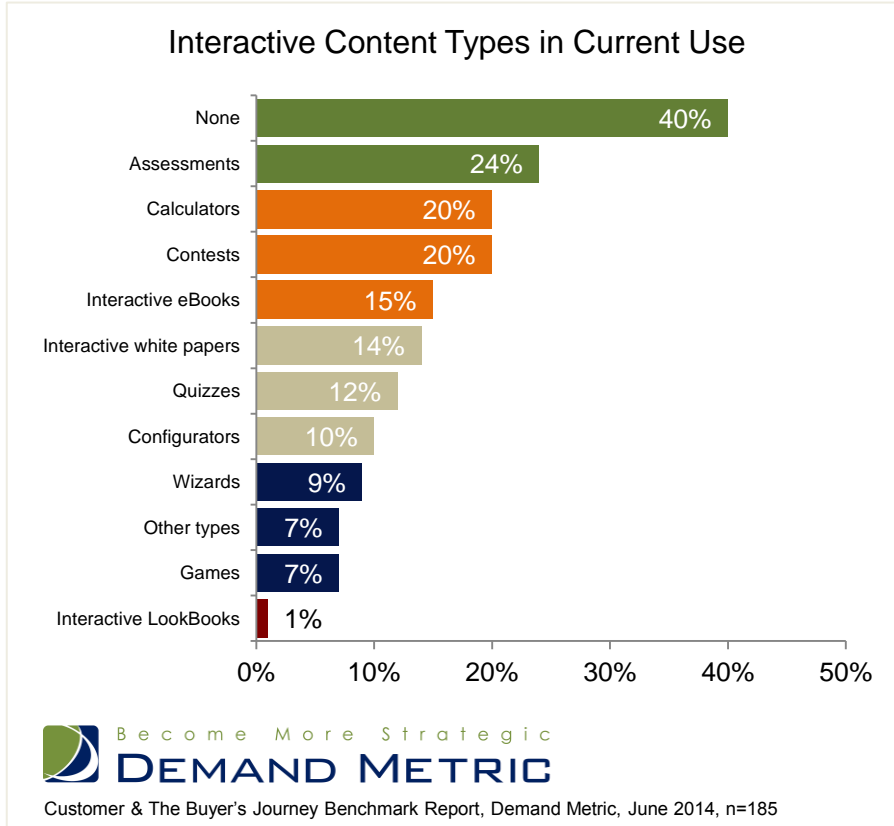Content marketers constantly strive to create content that converts better.

In this study, a set of possible approaches for improving conversion rates was presented to participants . The participants were asked to rank the list from 1 to 7 according to which approach they believed would best improve conversion rates (1 being the best). The results are as follows:

1. Content that makes it faster, easier and more fun for prospects to learn.

2. Content that stands out from passive or uninspiring content formats.

3. Content that enables wide distribution and can directly generate leads.

4. Content that collects buyer insights behaviorally instead of by fields on a form.

5. Content that lets different segments use the same content or app and zoom in to what's relevant.

6. Content that has social sharing built directly in to the interactions.

7. Other approaches.

INTERACTIVE CONTENT INVENTORY

Figure 13: *40% of study participants do not use any interactive content or apps.*

Interactive Content Types in Current Use

- None — 40%
- Assessments — 24%
- Calculators — 20%
- Contests — 20%
- Interactive eBooks — 15%
- Interactive white papers — 14%
- Quizzes — 12%
- Configurators — 10%
- Wizards — 9%
- Other types — 7%
- Games — 7%
- Interactive LookBooks — 1%

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A wide variety of interactive content types and formats exist, and this study conducted an inventory to determine which types are currently in use.
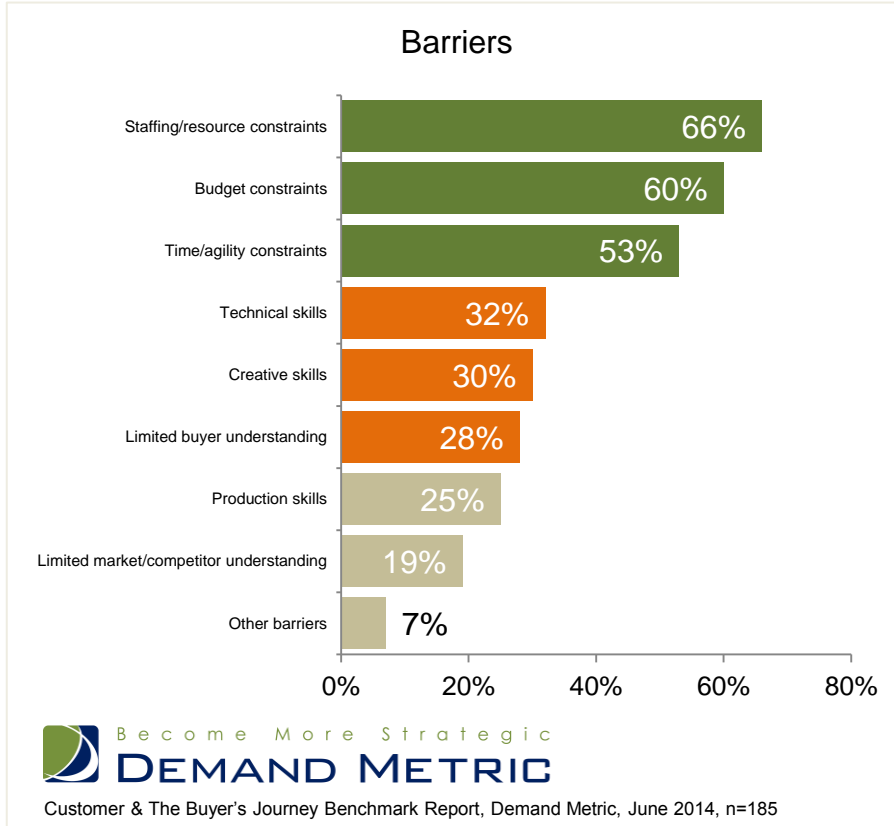
The data for this inquiry is presented in *Figure 13*.

Some of the "Other types" responses to this survey question were:

- "Blog"

- "Surveys"

- "Interactive report"

- "Interactive infographic"

- "Videos/tutorials"

- "Video and additional document downloads associated with video content"

BARRIERS, METRICS & BUDGET

Figure 14: *Two-thirds of study participants report staffing or resource constraints as the major barrier to greater content marketing success.*

Barriers

Barrier	Percentage
Staffing/resource constraints	66%
Budget constraints	60%
Time/agility constraints	53%
Technical skills	32%
Creative skills	30%
Limited buyer understanding	28%
Production skills	25%
Limited market/competitor understanding	19%
Other barriers	7%

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Organizations that market with content are presented with a number of barriers as they try to create a better experience for the buyers during their purchase consideration journey.

The study participants provided feedback about the barriers they encounter. The data collected from this feedback is presented in *Figure 14*.

The top three barriers reported – staffing/resources, budget, and time/agility – are related.

Sufficient budgets for content marketing can quickly make these and most other barriers identified here disappear. Vendors with content solutions can gain an advantage by providing their solutions in a way that increases user productivity and lowers the cost of content production.

BARRIERS, METRICS & BUDGET

Some of the study participants who selected the "Other barriers" response option in *Figure 14* contributed these insightful comments:

- "Buy-in from management"

- "Organizational buy-in"

- "Senior management buy-in"

- "Lack of management support in our sales-centric culture"

- "Legal constraints on what we can and can't say/spin"

- "Data segmentation aligned with content strategy"

- "Organizational silos that don't share information"

- "Undefined branding and limited self-knowledge"

- "Limited understanding of the relationship between the stages of our buyer's journey and how our online content influences offline conversions"
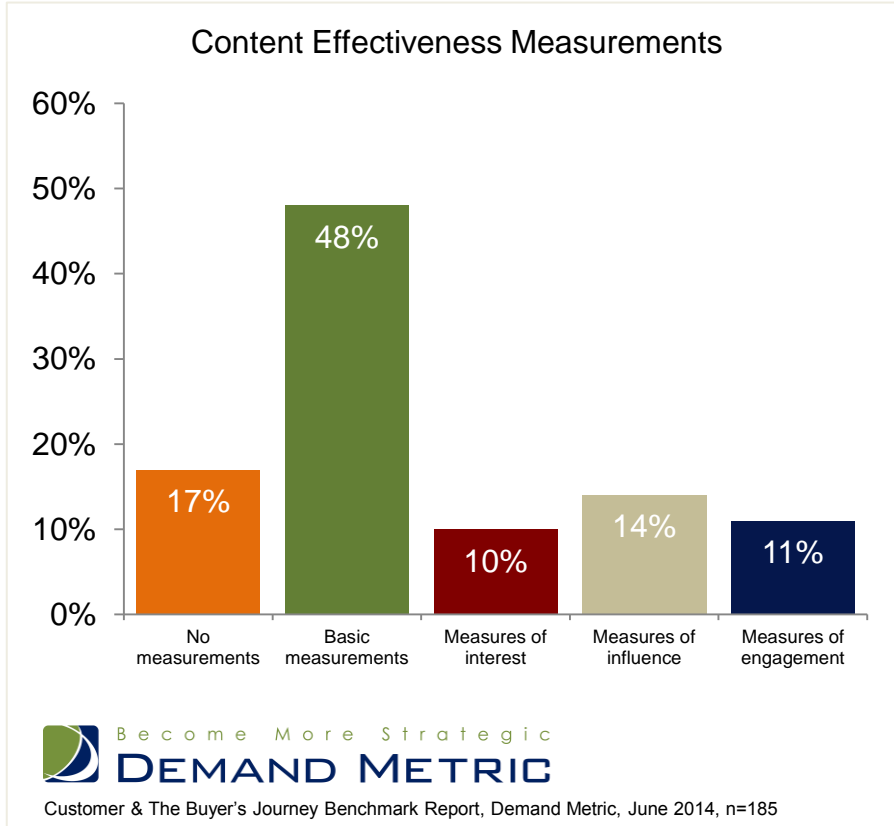
Any strategic initiative needs a set of metrics to help the strategy owner monitor performance as well as report results to stakeholders. This study asked participants to select which of the following statements best describes how they measure the effectiveness of the content, information or digital assets used to influence the buyer's journey:

1. We do not have measurements for this.

2. We have basic measurements of consumption, such as views, downloads, clicks, etc.

3. We have some measure of interest in our content.

4. We have some measure of how our content influences awareness or consideration.

5. We have some measure of the engagement our content produces.

BARRIERS, METRICS & BUDGET

Figure 15: Almost two-thirds of study participants have only basic or no measurements at all.

Content Effectiveness Measurements

Category	Value
No measurements	17%
Basic measurements	48%
Measures of interest	10%
Measures of influence	14%
Measures of engagement	11%

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The response options detailed on the previous page represent a hierarchy, with response option #1 representing no measurements, response option #2 the most basic level, and response option #5 the highest level of measurement.

Figure 15 summarizes the current state of content marketing measurement efforts.

For the top three tiers in this measurement hierarchy – interest, influence and engagement – organizations that report using interactive content are far ahead in measuring content effectiveness.
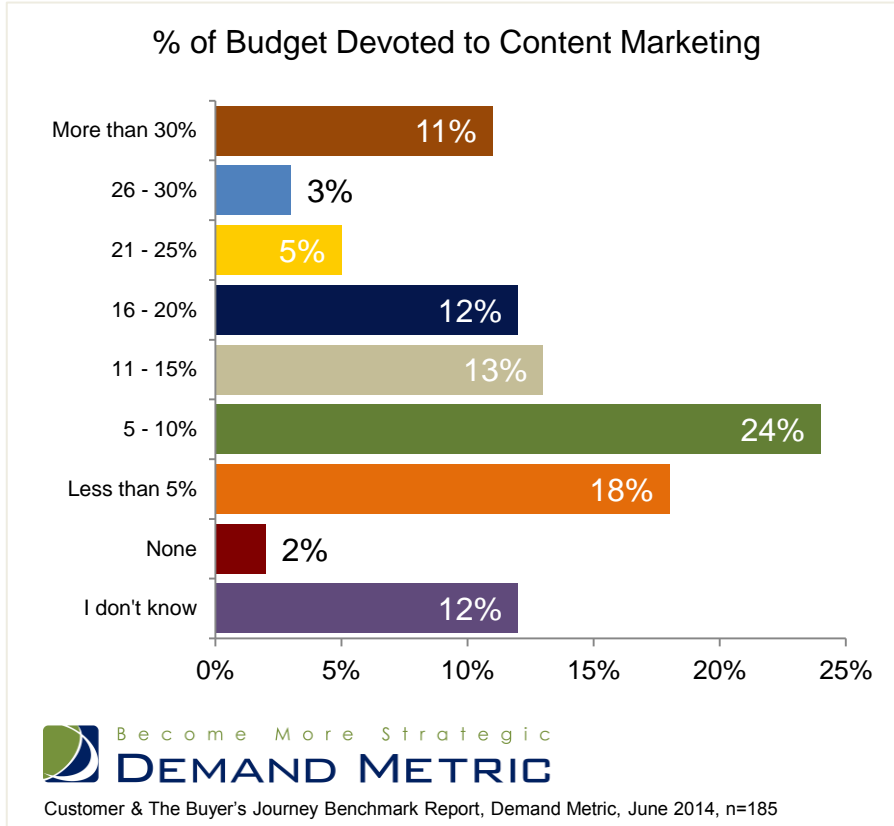
A full 50% of the organizations with more interactive content use measurements in these top three tiers, compared to just 29% for organizations deploying primarily passive content.

The reason is simple: interactive content enables higher levels of effectiveness measurements, because the metrics are often built in to the content itself.

BARRIERS, METRICS & BUDGET

Figure 16: *55% of organizations studied allocate 15% or less of their marketing budgets to content creation and marketing.*

% of Budget Devoted to Content Marketing

Category	Value
More than 30%	11%
26 - 30%	3%
21 - 25%	5%
16 - 20%	12%
11 - 15%	13%
5 - 10%	24%
Less than 5%	18%
None	2%
I don't know	12%

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The spending on content varies tremendously, as the data from this study reveals in *Figure 16*.

Any presentation of budget data usually leads to a wise, follow-up question:

Does greater spending produce better results?

This budget allocation data was analyzed to determine if there was a relationship between higher spending and greater effectiveness on any of the effectiveness measures this study examined. **The analysis results were emphatic: higher spending does not produce greater content marketing effectiveness.**

This study concludes that content marketing effectiveness isn't a matter of how much is spent, but how it is spent.

An organization can spend heavily on passive content and get lackluster results, and another organization can spend modestly on interactive content and get excellent results.

ANALYST BOTTOM LINE

Content marketing will continue to enjoy the status of a favored marketing strategy, and this study does nothing to refute the value of the strategy. **The right conclusion to draw from this study is that content marketing is not most effective when approached as an arms race.**

Even just one year ago, for an organization to have content marketing success, it simply needed to stick its toe in the content marketing pool. Just getting content out there was good enough; the format didn't matter much as long as the quality was good. Success with content compelled organizations to publish more: if one white paper was good, two or more were even better. More of any form of content was better than less. Many organizations figured this out and became content factories and it worked pretty well.

This strategy is still working, but it's clearly slowing down. The problem with any good idea is that everyone does it, and with increased adoption and quantities of content, it loses its power to impress, engage and convert. **The problem isn't that content marketing is no longer a good idea, it's just that content formats need to evolve.**

An "arms race" mentality won't improve the strategy's effectiveness. What's needed is a "smart bomb", and in the world of content marketing, that smart bomb is interactive content. **The organization that publishes an assessment app that does in five minutes what hundreds of competing white papers attempt to do will quickly eclipse the passive content.**

The cost and technology barriers to deploying interactive content are falling fast. As this study proves, it's not a matter of spending more on content, but spending it on the right things. The key is to drive content marketing with a clear set of objectives. **If achieving those objectives depends on higher levels of audience engagement, then interactive content is the right approach.**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABOUT ION INTERACTIVE

ion interactive is a marketing apps platform that generates leads and revenue with engaging, highly interactive, digital marketing experiences that can be created and tested without developers.

ion interactive is used to differentiate brands, increase engagement and improve conversions in content marketing, social marketing, email marketing and advertising campaigns.

For more information, please visit www.ioninteractive.com.

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Demand Metric is a marketing research and advisory firm serving a membership community of over 40,000 marketing professionals and consultants in 75 countries.

Offering consulting methodologies, advisory services, and 500+ premium marketing tools and templates, Demand Metric resources and expertise help the marketing community plan more efficiently and effectively, answer the difficult questions about their work with authority and conviction and complete marketing projects more quickly and with greater confidence, boosting the respect of the marketing team and making it easier to justify resources the team needs to succeed.

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APPENDIX – SURVEY BACKGROUND

This Demand Metric Content & the Buyer's Journey Benchmark Study survey was administered online during the period of May 28, 2014 through June 4, 2014. During this period, 244 responses were collected, 185 of which were complete enough for inclusion in the analysis. The data was analyzed using SPSS to ensure the statistical validity of the findings.

Summarized below is the basic categorization data collected about respondents to enable filtering and analysis of the data:

Annual Revenues:

- $10 million or less (49%)
- $11 to $25 million (7%)
- $26 to $100 million (14%)
- $101 to $500 million (12%)
- $501 million to $1 billion (1%)
- Over $1 billion (17%)

Type of Organization:

- Mostly or entirely B2B (58%)
- Mostly or entirely B2C (18%)
- Blend of B2B/B2C (10%)
- Agency (14%)

Primary Role of Respondent:

- President, CEO or Owner (21%)
- Marketing (56%)
- Sales (6%)
- Product Management (5%)
- Operations/Administration (6%)
- Other (6%)

For more information, visit us at:

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