

Cheryl Broom [00:00:00]:

Hi, I'm Cheryl Broom, CEO of GradComm and host of Higher Ed Conversations. Today I have a fantastic guest that talks about content marketing, and we have a lot of fun discussing examples. But before we jump into the conversation with Brian Piper, I first want to announce that the podcast has a new sponsor, which I'm really excited about. Higher Ed Conversations is Now sponsored by EdTech Connect. It is a fantastic website platform where. You can go for higher ed technology solutions.

Cheryl Broom [00:00:37]:

So I'll be sharing a little bit more about EdTechConnect later in the podcast, but before we get there, I want to introduce our fantastic guest. Brian Piper is author of Epic Content Marketing, which is a marketing book that dives deep into content marketing strategies. And in our conversation today, we talk about how to start a content strategy. We talk about what is content strategy, what does that even mean? Where do you place content? How do you reuse content? But really at the heart of it, it's how do you create content that's actually meaningful and relevant to people rather than always focusing on the institution itself? It's a great conversation for those of you who write, for those of you who design, for those of you who do speeches, or even for those of you who simply consume content, you're not going to want to miss this conversation. Let's get started. Well, Brian, thank you so much for being a guest on the podcast. I'm absolutely delighted to have you here and to learn more about your book.

Brian Piper [00:01:38]:

Well, thank you very much, Cheryl. It's a pleasure to be here.

Cheryl Broom [00:01:40]:

Yeah. Well, tell me a little bit about yourself. You have a great background in higher education yourself, and now you're an author of a fantastic new book. So tell me all about you.

Brian Piper [00:01:50]:

Yeah, so I actually started out as a website developer and was working for several different companies doing elearning, marketing, digital marketing. And I decided I read Epic Content Marketing the first edition back in 2014, and as soon as I read it, I was like, oh, my gosh. You can market to people by telling stories and helping them and solving problems, answering questions for them without specifically trying to sell them something. You're just figuring out how to build that awareness and get them to, you know, know, like, and trust you as a brand, as a person, before you actually start to try to sell them something. And so as soon as I read the first edition, I went down to the head of our marketing department. I said, you need to hire me to do your digital marketing. She did. And within the first year, we doubled our organic traffic.

Brian Piper [00:02:46]:

And so we were able to do a lot of really good content marketing. And that's what led me into the job at University of Rochester about six years ago and kind of did the same thing there. They initially hired me to just, you know, look at our central communications data and figure out what content was working and what wasn't and how we could better optimize that content. And

so then also within the first year there, we doubled our organic traffic. And as soon as that happened, they said, you need to work across the whole institution and help everybody do this better. So now I've been working with all of our different partner groups and giving presentations on keyword research and search engine optimization and how to think about connecting your content to your marketing and your messaging and your strategic goals. And, you know, through that process, I started speaking at industry conferences as well. And that led me into speaking at Content Marketing World, which is Joe Polizi's big event at the time.

Brian Piper [00:03:53]:

So I got to meet Joe, thank him for writing the book, changed my career path. And then through that relationship, over the course of the next couple of years, I started presenting at that conference and finally convinced Joe that we needed a second edition of the books.

Cheryl Broom [00:04:10]:

Well, that's fantastic. First of all, I love the fact that you just like marched into a department and was like, I'm going to run your digital marketing. That's fantastic. And, but it also shows that you have a lot of confidence and, you know, the ability to create good content.

Brian Piper [00:04:25]:

That's right. That's right. And I knew I had, I had done it in the past and I had figured out how to make content perform well on search. So that was kind of the low hanging fruit. If I could figure out how to drive more traffic and we could set that content up properly to create conversions, then it was a pretty easy sell in once they started seeing the impact of it.

Cheryl Broom [00:04:45]:

Excellent. Well, I want to start off with just a really basic question. What is content marketing? How is content marketing different than regular marketing, digital marketing, earned media, what makes it unique? How do you define that?

Brian Piper [00:04:59]:

Yeah, and you know, we all create content for our businesses, for our brands, for our institutions. And really the difference, the there's three differentiating factors that turn content into content marketing. And it's really that you're creating valuable and compelling content for your audience. So it has to be valuable, it has to be compelling, it has to answer some need, solve some problem. And then you have to have a target audience. You have to have a specific person, group of people who you are targeting with this content. So you have to be able to make that message resonate with them. So it's answering their particular problem or helping them solve an issue that they have.

Brian Piper [00:05:44]:

And then the last part is the end goal of this is to create some sort of profit driven action. So what is it about, you know, the action you want them to take that will eventually lead them to helping you reach your strategic goals? So it's those three factors that kind of take regular content and turn that into content marketing.

Cheryl Broom [00:06:08]:

I love the first, first idea that you're actually creating something useful for your audience. So it's not necessarily you're not making ads, you're making information that people actually want to consume that might help them. But I mean, your ultimate goal clearly is to convert somebody into a customer or follower, but you're doing it in a way that actually gives them something tangible and valuable.

Brian Piper [00:06:32]:

That's right. And I mean, and that's the key is you're not, you're not doing interruption selling, you're not doing interruption marketing. You're really trying to answer their questions so that when they search, you provide the best answer and the best solution. So they start to see you as an expert, as a source they can come back to and someone who they trust. And that's really how you build that relationship, you create that connection. And that's one of the things that makes content marketing different. It makes it, it's really a long term strategy. It's not a campaign, it's not a one off process or project really.

Brian Piper [00:07:09]:

You have to put some time into it. You have to create that relationship and build that trust over time.

Cheryl Broom [00:07:14]:

I love that. It's difficult, I think, for colleges to justify putting that much energy into content marketing year round. It's hard. But I actually had a guest on earlier this summer from hootsuite who had mentioned that most students start their journey on social media. And we know that most students take up to a year to decide what college they're going to attend, if they're going to attend at all. So if they're going to social media, they're checking you out. I mean, the content there needs to be relevant and helpful and guide them in their journey. Right.

Cheryl Broom [00:07:48]:

Or you're going to lose them. Because one single digital ad is not going to make somebody want to come to your college.

Brian Piper [00:07:52]:

Right.

Cheryl Broom [00:07:52]:

It's the whole experience with who you are.

Brian Piper [00:07:54]:

Yeah, absolutely. And you know, that's part of the difference in social marketing. Social media marketing versus content marketing is really when you're doing social media marketing, you are thinking about the channel. First you're thinking about what channel are you going to promote on, what audience are you trying to reach on that channel. And then you create content specific

to that channel. Whereas in content marketing, it really starts with the idea of the content. What problem are you trying to solve? Or what users? And then what content are you going to create that's going to help solve that problem? And then. Absolutely.

Brian Piper [00:08:32]:

Use social, to distribute, to promote, to reach out to an audience for that particular piece of content marketing. But you know, we tell people, don't stop doing the other marketing you're doing. Think about adding content marketing on. This is a long term solution. So go ahead and do your paid marketing that you normally do, but give your content marketing time to work and then look at the returns that you get based on content marketing versus paid marketing. And a lot of people are surprised once they start looking at those numbers.

Cheryl Broom [00:09:09]:

Yeah. And how do you put roi or how do you even start to measure your content marketing? That's, I think that's one of the struggles that when I talk to our clients is we really want to be doing more of this, but we don't know how to explain its value.

Brian Piper [00:09:25]:

Yeah. And so many times we get asked the question right up front, what should we be measuring? What data should we be looking at? What metrics really matter? And of course, the answer is always the most disappointing answer. It depends.

Cheryl Broom [00:09:42]:

That's the answer that attorneys always give you.

Brian Piper [00:09:44]:

That's right. That's right, Absolutely. But you really have to start off with your strategic goals. Where are you trying to go? What are you trying to accomplish? So once you really know what goals are your priorities, what goals are the most important to you, then you have to think about who your specific audience is, who are you talking to? And you know, when I first started working at the, at the university, I would ask our content creators, they would come to the editorial team with a story idea. It would be a great story about some amazing research that was just done. And we would ask them, it's a great story, you definitely need to do it. Who's the audience? And they would say, everyone. Everyone is the audience.

Brian Piper [00:10:25]:

It's like, no, everyone is not an audience. You have to pick which audience can you get to take some action. After reading this content, that's going to have the biggest impact on helping you reach your goals. And once you know who the most impactful audience is going to be, that's who your target is, then you need to start thinking about tactics that you're going to use to get your audience to take that action. So are you trying to get them to subscribe to your newsletter? Are you trying to get them to follow you on social? Are you trying to get them to, you know, request more information or schedule a campus tour? So once you know the tactic that you want to employ, then you can start looking at what data you should be collecting to see if that

tactic is working, to see if that's driving them towards that know, like and trust, you know, conversion funnel, so that eventually they're going to, you know, take some action and help you reach your goals. And, you know, it's going to solve their problems along the way as well.

Cheryl Broom [00:11:27]:

So it sounds like, in terms of, like a process that you have a piece of content or content strategy that you know, you want to get out, so you create your content, but then you need to stop and ask yourself, who is my audience and what do I want them to do as a result.

Brian Piper [00:11:42]:

Exactly. And every piece of content that you should, that you create, not maybe not every social post, but as many. You know, any impactful piece of content that you are going to create should have a specific target audience and a specific strategy that it's aligned to, whether it's, you know, an institutional strategy or department strategy, school strategy, whatever it is. But every piece of content should have a particular action that you're trying to get that user to take. Even if it's just reading more content. That's what you should be tracking and you should be saying, oh, well, this piece of content works really well to drive people towards this particular action or towards reaching this particular goal.

Cheryl Broom [00:12:26]:

Excellent. One of the things I loved about your book is that you have such rich examples of great content strategies. I'm wondering if you can share one of them for the listeners, something that stands out from the book?

Brian Piper [00:12:39]:

Yeah, I mean, there are so many, just fantastic examples. But one of my favorites, and one of the ones we go back to a lot is Cleveland Clinic. So Cleveland Clinic started out in 2013 with three people on their content marketing team. They had a blog, the Health Essentials blog, that was getting around 250,000 page views a year. And they decided that they were going to double down on content marketing and go all in and really focus on answering questions and addressing concerns that their patients had. So they were able to tell the physicians that came to them and said, you need to write a story on this new procedure we're doing. They were able to say, no, we're not writing that until we know that this is a problem or a question or an issue for our patients. And once our patients start asking about it or start wondering about it, then we'll put that content out, but we'll focus it on what problems that is solving and what questions that is that are answering for them.

Brian Piper [00:13:42]:

And you know, within two or three years they were actually, they had started monetizing their content and putting ads on their content. So then it became an actual revenue source for the business. And within the last 10 years, they've increased their content marketing team to over a hundred full time employees and they're on track this year to reach a billion page views on their blog.

Cheryl Broom [00:14:10]:

I remember that from the book and the interview that you did with I think the CMO or the woman who started it all and had at the time had no idea that her content strategy was going to grow into what it is today. And now they're really a leader in health information across the nation and the world.

Brian Piper [00:14:26]:

Amanda Todorovich is the lead over there and she's just doing an amazing job of really driving that, you know, that whole brand forward. And she said most of her job now is just going around to different groups within the organization and convincing them of the impact and the importance of content marketing and showing them how well it's working for them.

Cheryl Broom [00:14:47]:

What that example really shows me is that back to that basic question that you talked about. The first point of content marketing is people ask you to put things out. And she actually said no, because our customers don't want to hear about that. And that's part of the challenge at a college is you have everybody wants to brag about their programs, they want their stories told. And you need to be able to ask them, like, why would people want to hear this? What problem are we solving? We just want to brag about the institution all the time. That's not interesting to people.

Brian Piper [00:15:21]:

That's one of the things we tell people all the time. And it's really hard for businesses and brands and institutions to hear is your customers don't care about your products or solutions or services. They only care how your products or solutions or services will help them solve their problems. That's what they care about.

Cheryl Broom [00:15:42]:

Well, we're having a great discussion. I want to talk to you more about what makes content marketing epic. But before we dive into that discussion, let's take a quick break.

Brian Piper [00:15:52]:

How do higher education decision makers find the right solution when technology evolves at light speed? Well, we usually start with our network. EdTechConnect is the network that's democratizing the higher ed technology conversation. EdTechConnect is free, so anyone with a EDU email address can sign up and list the software and services they use in their role at their school. Once you're in, you can find out what solutions similar schools are doing all over the country. Whether you're looking to find the hot new AI tool or maybe learn options, you have to upgrade your campus search engine or even get to your short list of marketing solution vendors. EdTechConnect is the place to go. So visit [EdTechConnect.com](https://EdTechConnect.com) and set up your free profile to get a pulse for what's happening with higher ed technology today.

Cheryl Broom [00:16:44]:

Okay, we're back from break. So back to our discussion about content marketing and making it relevant to your user. What type of questions should people be asking like, besides how why does my customer care about this? Is there anything else that should guide people in the beginning of writing great content and creating great content? What advice would you give to somebody as they're starting to beef up their own content marketing strategy?

Brian Piper [00:17:11]:

Yeah, I mean, and really the thing is to really get to know your users. So we do recommend that people create Personas. And, you know, there's a lot of information you can gather to build a Persona and fully flesh it out and put all sorts of demographic information in there. But one of the things we always say is the, you know, you can, you can gather this information through surveys or questionnaires, but the best way is actually to have conversations with your customers, with your students, with your faculty, whoever you're trying to target, and really understand what are the things that keep them up at night, where does their attention go, what takes their energy and what problems are they really facing. So that's a great place to start. You can come up with a lot of ideas around questions you can answer there. But you really have to understand the other end of their process or their issue is what is it that makes them decide to choose you or not? What's their decision making criteria? Because you really have to understand those to be able to keep pushing those users down through that funnel. You can bring them in at the top and answer their surface level questions, but you want to keep guiding them through.

Brian Piper [00:18:29]:

You want to keep pulling them down, you want to help them see, oh, there's other problems that I have that this content can help me out with, that this resource can help me solve. They can, you can give them tools and calculators and different things to help figure out, you know, what their financial aid package might look like or where they're going to Live on campus or all these other concerns that they're going to have and put out content to them that doesn't just showcase how great you are, but it really shows them that they're not going to have those problems if they, if they choose you. Or here's just some guidance on things to be aware of in general. Going to a college or to a university and not really try to sell them on your services or your solution, your institution.

Cheryl Broom [00:19:17]:

Yeah, I love this idea of using Personas to develop content because we use Personas to develop media tactics. But I hadn't ever thought about using them to guide you in a content strategy. And that is really brilliant. And I think most of our clients are already developed Personas around the type of students that come to their colleges. Now they just need to take it a step further and say, now what type of content is going to speak to these people and help them?

Brian Piper [00:19:50]:

Yeah. And it gives you. It gives you someone to, you know, imagine that you are talking to, like, a real person that you're talking to. And that's, you know, one of the things I tell people is you're out there all the time talking to, you know, your students or your faculty, talking to your audience.

Use their name in your head when you're creating that content. Warren Buffett does this when he writes his shareholder letter. He starts every letter, dear Doris and Bertie, who are his sisters, because he knows he wants the content of that letter to be conversational and not too technical and not too far into the weeds, because they're not really concerned about that. They just want to know about what's going to help them, what's going to make their lives easier.

Cheryl Broom [00:20:30]:

So we're recording this in June, and it comes out in September. But back in June, yesterday, we actually did focus groups for college where we had focus groups of Hispanic and African American students. And we talked to them about their challenges, their goals, their successes, how they heard about the college, what type of marketing they want to see. And your, you know, then we're making. Now we're working on Personas for the college. But your comment really made me think. Some of the students had said in the focus group that the thing that they loved the most about the college was the fact that it had created a community for them. And the college has dropped community from its name, so it no longer has community in its name.

Cheryl Broom [00:21:12]:

And now I'm brainstorming, like, now, clearly those students would want to hear more about how they can become part of a community. Like, what communities does the college have what opportunities? So rather than just saying, oh, we've got this great program, we've got this great program, really phrasing it in, we're going to help you become part of a community. Here's ways you can become part of a community. I mean, you could build a whole content just around that notion of how to be in a community at college and what that means.

Brian Piper [00:21:41]:

Yeah, absolutely. And I see community as the future of, you know, business brands, colleges, institutions. I mean, people, especially in this age of AI generated content and where we know from the Edelman Trust Barometer that people are having a lot of trust issues with authority, with government, with institutions and companies. So really trying to create that community of experts where you can bring people in, they can get that sense of belonging. They're connecting with other people with similar interests and real people, not, you know, bots or just random people out on social media. So I really believe that building that strong community and creating that sense of belonging and culture is incredibly important moving forward.

Cheryl Broom [00:22:30]:

Yeah, definitely. And your content should showcase that. I mean, that's something that's a selling point that does put your consumer first because you want them to experience community and they want to experience too.

Brian Piper [00:22:43]:

Yeah. And you're celebrating the people who are in that community, your other members of your. Of your school. Yeah.

Cheryl Broom [00:22:48]:

So you're. The title of the book is Epic Content Marketing. So I want to know what makes content marketing epic.

Brian Piper [00:22:54]:

Yeah. And we did, you know, one of the chapters in the book, we asked all these really big influencers what they thought made content epic. And there were all sorts of different ideas, everything from, you know, content that you would be willing to pay for. But I think it really comes down to figuring out how to add that value, how to make it engaging or entertaining or educational, where you're really creating this sense of uniqueness in your content and your answer and what you're providing that is different than everything else that's out there. And one of the ways to really do that is to put your own voice into it, to tell your own stories. We are naturally lovers of stories, and we want to hear what that conflict is and what the resolution is and how showcase how people like you deal with those issues and find the solutions. And I think being able to showcase that within your content will help elevate you to the point where people want to sign up, they want to subscribe, they want to come back and get more because they really like what you're saying.

Cheryl Broom [00:24:05]:

Now we think of tactics for content, so we obviously think of social Media. But what other. Like, how does content marketing show up apart from maybe in social media? What tactics do you use to distribute your content?

Brian Piper [00:24:19]:

Yeah, and there's so many different ways. I mean, you know, newsletters, podcasts, the. What we're creating right now is content for content marketing. And really one of the powerful features of content creating content is looking for ways to repurpose, repackage, reuse content. And so many people and brands, institutions create great content that just kind of sits to the side. They don't promote it, they don't reuse it, they don't showcase it. And really looking for ways to figure out what content really resonates with your users and keep using that. Go back to your hits, find different ways to repackage it, to update it, to put it out again.

Brian Piper [00:25:06]:

We spend so much time trying to create new content that we forget about all this gold that we have sitting out there.

Cheryl Broom [00:25:16]:

Oh. So I have a friend who is a marketing director for a huge department of surgery and she told me once, every piece of content you should figure out seven ways to use it. So it's her seven way rule test. And I've loved that. So, like, I'm going to use this podcast for an example. So the problem that we're solving in higher education conversations is we have people across the nation who work in higher ed, marketing and leadership that want to be better at their jobs. And they only have, you know, 30 minutes once a month for professional development. So we want to bring on great guests like you and teach them something.

Cheryl Broom [00:25:52]:

So there's the podcast, but then we take your little video snippet and we use it as a, as a video. Then we turn it into a blog, Then we do social media posts. Then we have a monthly newsletter where we feature the podcast. So I'm up to five. So it is, you don't have to just use it once. A press release doesn't just need to go out to the media, it can be done, accepted and used in other platforms. As long as you're changing it in a way that makes it relevant on that platform.

Brian Piper [00:26:24]:

Exactly. Focusing on the channel that you're distributing on is key. And they're, you know, that's one of the things, there's so much conversation going on around AI. That's one of the things that I love around AI is it makes it so much easier to repurpose and reuse content in a variety of ways. It takes a lot of that heavy lift off of you. So, you know, you can take one piece of content and Create social posts for three or four different social channels and vertical video for shorts and reels and TikTok or wherever you want to put out content. But yeah, there's so many options to reuse and repurpose without having to spend a whole lot of time doing it.

Cheryl Broom [00:27:07]:

Yeah. So. Well, I would encourage listeners when they create something great. Put that seven way test or maybe even just start with three. What are three other ways I can use this?

Brian Piper [00:27:17]:

Absolutely.

Cheryl Broom [00:27:18]:

Because we do. We chase the shiny object, we chase the new thing, we're off to the next thing and we're missing a lot of great opportunities.

Brian Piper [00:27:24]:

Yeah. And every quarter we go back and we look at content that we've already got out there and we see what's performing well and try to figure out how we can optimize that better, how we can answer other questions within that content that people are already asking.

Cheryl Broom [00:27:39]:

Well, I really enjoyed reading your book. I got a lot out of it. And I encourage our listeners if they, you know, there's so many writers, so many content creators that listen to this podcast to pick it up, just if you share just a couple more highlights that they can expect from the book would be fantastic.

Brian Piper [00:27:55]:

Yeah. So, you know, when we started writing the second edition, we really looked at, you know, initially we were just going to throw the whole first edition away. We figured it had been 10 years, everything has changed in content marketing. And then once we actually started going through and creating the content, we were like, a lot of this still works, a lot of the strategy is still very applicable. Coming up with your content marketing mission statement and figuring out your

audience, all those things really still apply. So the first third of the book probably was, you know, updating examples and making some changes to the statistics and the data that we had in there. And then the second third of the book, we really get into content optimization and different channels and how to distribute and how to use analytics to go back and look at your content and see what's working. And then the last third of the book, we really focused on, you know, new technologies.

Brian Piper [00:28:51]:

We looked at Web three, we look at AI, we talk a lot about building communities and how to convert an audience into a community and into super fans. And so it kind of covers the whole gamut of, of content marketing from beginning to end. And there's, there's something in there for, you know, a big brand that's looking to do better content marketing or, you know, even individual content entrepreneurs looking to be content creators on their own.

Cheryl Broom [00:29:20]:

Oh, I had dinner last night with one of my Sister in laws. And it was the dinner where we were taught how to make cocktails. So they like, it was like a restaurant that they had this new cocktail out. So they invited patrons to come learn how to make the cocktail and then have dinner, which I thought was great. Like, I actually paid for class. I paid more to learn how to make the cocktail than I would have if I just bought it to drink it. But they are a great example, I think, of an interactive content strategy. So we got a newsletter saying they were having this class to make a cocktail.

Cheryl Broom [00:29:55]:

We showed up, we were making the cocktail. The bartender taught us to make the cocktail. Everybody's taking pictures of themselves making the cocktail. And then the. The restaurant had a social media coordinator that was posting reels of all of us. And I'm like, this is brilliant. I mean, this. First of all, they're making money off of this, right? Right.

Cheryl Broom [00:30:14]:

I paid 30 bucks to make a.

Brian Piper [00:30:16]:

Cocktail and they're generating all the content, right?

Cheryl Broom [00:30:21]:

Yeah. Oh, and they had the Tequila distributor come and talk to us about this new Tequila. So, I mean, this, I thought it was just a perfect example of, hey, our customers love cocktails. Let's create an experience. Let's create content out of it. So really good, easy way to do something fun.

Brian Piper [00:30:40]:

Right? And when you think about, you know, in higher ed, we have all of these students who are hungry to learn how to be creators and YouTubers and TikTokers, and they're out there trying to

create content and playing around with it. Uwe Bristol has a whole program just for student content creators where they're training their students how to create content and then they're using that for the institution. So really there's. There's so many opportunities for us.

Cheryl Broom [00:31:08]:

Yeah, I know we can't make cocktails on campus, but you can have students make other things. Well, Brian, it's been such a delight to talk to you. Tell us where you can find your book and remind us of the name again.

Brian Piper [00:31:23]:

It is Epic Content Marketing the second edition. You can find us on Amazon or Goodreads or anywhere you buy books. And you can find out more about me@brianwpiper.com or Brian WPiper on almost every social channel.

Cheryl Broom [00:31:38]:

Well, thank you so much for your time and it was a great conversation.

Brian Piper [00:31:40]:

Thank you, Cheryl. I really appreciate it and I love the content that you're bringing to everyone. So thank you for that.

Cheryl Broom [00:31:45]:

Thank you. And that wraps up this episode of the Higher Education Conversations podcast. I'm Host and GradComm CEO Cheryl Broom, a big thank you to our sponsor, EdTechConnect. EdTechConnect is free, so anyone with a EDU email address can sign up and list the software and services they use in their role at their school. So visit edtechconnect.com and set up your free profile to get a pulse for what's happening with higher ed technology today. And while you're online, take a few minutes to leave our podcast a five star review. It will help other colleges and universities find us and learn from the great experts we have on the show. That's it for now. Until next time.