

Shondell Varcianna:

It is a long game and it's important to understand that when you do post something, all of your followers aren't seeing what you post, unless you get more high level and you're doing ads then you can get more targeted. But if you're posting even consistently on social media, the reason why I'm a big, big advocate of posting often and consistently is because you need to be in front of your customers all the time.

James Robert Lay:

Greetings and hello, I am James Robert Lay and welcome to the 91st episode of The Banking On Digital Growth Podcast. Today's episode is part of the exponential insight series, and I'm excited to welcome Shondell Varcianna to the show. Shondell is the founder and CEO of Varci Media, helping financial brands get even more inbound inquiries by writing blog posts that convert and that right there is the key, it's all about the conversion and that's why I look forward to this conversation because content marketing it's starting to trend once again as a hot topic, because as financial brands have navigated their way through the COVID pandemic, content has been one of the primary ways for them to educate, for them to empower account holders and really bring a sense of empathy through the digital channels. So welcome to the show, Shondell.

Shondell Varcianna:

Thank you so much for having me.

James Robert Lay:

Looking forward to this conversation and before we get into this, what is just one thing that is going fantastic for you right now, whether that be personally or professionally?

Shondell Varcianna:

Well, one thing that's really going well is that financial institutions are coming on board with content, especially the ones that didn't really think it was that important. They're seeing the value of consistently being in front of their target audience and just educating them and answering their questions and clearing up any misconceptions. So that's a positive thing that's happening in the industry overall. I just think, especially since the pandemic has happened and branches were closed and things like that, some of the FI's were forced to just focus digitally because they didn't really have any other choice. So I think that's good thing because at the end of the day you always want to be where your customers are and their customers are definitely online.

James Robert Lay:

Absolutely and before we get too far into this trend, this pattern that you're seeing, that I'm seeing, that I know others are seeing as well. I want to start off by helping the dear listener gain some clarity from your worldview of what is content, what is content marketing? Because this idea of content, content marketing it's somewhat of a buzzword, it gets thrown around a lot. And from the training, the coaching, the advising that we do over here with financial brands, there still seems to be some confusion because like Digital Growth, everyone defines content marketing just a little bit differently from their experience, from their point of view, even I think more so here in the banking space. So can you start us off by providing some clarity from your perspective of what is content, what is content marketing for that matter?

Shondell Varcianna:

Absolutely. So content is information and that information could come in many different channels. This is content right now, this podcast. People are going to be listening to the audio version of it, that's content. Netflix provides content through TV shows, through movies. Content could be the written word, content could be video. It could be audio, it's really any type of information that is getting in front of your ideal customer and then the marketing of that is just really the distribution of that content on the different social media channels, on your website, whether it's on the podcast, whether it's clubhouse, that's really the marketing of that, really getting it in front of your ideal customer. So that's [inaudible 00:04:24]

James Robert Lay:

I like that. Content is information and the marketing pieces to... once again, is to get that information, that insight, that education, that awareness in front of the ideal account holder, the prospect. When we look at the macro level specifically through the lens of financial services, what is a commonly held belief when it comes to content, when it comes to content marketing, a common belief that you just passionately disagree with? Where might others say one thing, but you're like, "I don't think so. I think content marketing is something else."

Shondell Varcianna:

Well, definitely a misconception is, "I can post whenever I feel like it." That's really a misconception because it is a long game and it's important to understand that when you do post something, all of your followers aren't seeing what you post, unless you get more high level and you're doing ads, then you can get more targeted but if you're posting even consistently on social media, the reason why I'm a big, big advocate of posting often and consistently is because you need to be in front of your customers all the time, they need to see you. It's out of sight, out of mind. There's just so many banks, credit unions. There's just so many options for your customer that if you're not in front of them consistently, if you're not answering their questions, if you're not clearing up any misconceptions, solving their problems, it's going to be a little bit difficult for you to get their business.

James Robert Lay:

And it's that misconception or the misunderstanding, that I can post whenever I want to, which typically leads to infrequency. So maybe a couple times a week if best, and we see this through some of the diagnostic work and the research that we're doing when putting the other training education, and I don't know where that misunderstanding lies, maybe we can dive a little bit deeper into that from what you're seeing and what you're hearing, because for me it's, well, if I post something on Facebook and that's free and it's going to get in front of... let's just say we have 10,000 fans on Facebook. Well, it's going to get in front of all 10,000, right? No wrong. How can you help to clarify and dive deeper into that? And what are some of the opportunities to overcome this misconception that the content is not going to reach everyone organically anymore?

Shondell Varcianna:

I think it's a mindset shift because banks are so old in terms of they've been around for so long. And what I've seen is some of them are not shifting with their customers, right? You have to always know how your customers are thinking, where your customers are going, where they are in their life journey, and how can you get in front of them to provide that value to them. Because the opportunity that banks have is you have a customer from 18 til death, you are really... not

many companies can say that, right? Well, a lot of companies just have a niche target market but you've got customers throughout the journey of their life. You've got products to satisfy customers through out life, but it's important to understand where they are and what their problems are. What are their pain points?

Shondell Varciana:

What questions are they asking? What misconceptions do they have? What do they want right now? Do they believe their FICO score has to be 650? Because that's wrong, right? Do they not think they can get into that dream house? Because maybe they don't think they make enough money, but they do. And the reason why it's important to be where they are is because that helps you to build the relationships and get to know them. Just like, if you and I are friends, I know what you like. So if I can provide that to you, I will. So you almost have to know your customers as well as you know your friends, because that's the only way you're going to be able to serve them at a higher level, and that takes time to build that relationship.

James Robert Lay:

And I think that right there is another misconception that I see in here is, well, we can post something and that's only going to reach a small percentage organically. I think that's now organic reach as it's known is two to 5% at best and that's why sometimes when you think about a content strategy, you also have to think of it from a pay at a play because you're having to tap into the rented land that you have on Mark Zuckerberg's world of Facebook and Instagram. LinkedIn still has some pretty good organic reach from what we've been seeing but then there's the side of the equation of know, like, and trust. People must know you before they like you, like you before they can trust you and content does help facilitate this know, like, trust paradigm.

James Robert Lay:

How important is it? Because that's from the lens of the consumer or the prospective account holder, but you're talking about, we need to know what our prospective account holders, their questions, their concerns are. What role do tools like say consumer personas play into this and is it worth taking the time to go down that? Because I get a lot of pushback when we say, "We recommend you do some consumer persona work."

James Robert Lay:

Or why do we want to do that? It's going to create us to... we have to focus on these few individuals and no, no, no, no it's going to provide clarity for use that you understand where their pain points are to help you with your content strategies going further. Can you provide some more perspective around personas?

Shondell Varciana:

Absolutely. I just had this conversation with a client yesterday actually. Because I was explaining to them that a 20 year old wants something different from a 30 year old or 30 five-year-old, right? A 20 year old may just be... their career is just starting to maybe purchasing their first vehicle, getting the first credit cards. They're just entering that career. A 30 year old may already have a child or two looking to get a mortgage. So you have to create content to speak to the different customers that you have. A first time home buyer is going to have different questions from an investor, right? An investor already has probably purchased homes before. So they already know all of the answers to those questions. But a first time home buyer doesn't really know anything about buying a home because they're first time home buyer.

Shondell Varciana:

So you would speak to those audiences differently and if you don't speak to them differently, you will lose them and you will lose them in the headline. So it's very important to... you have to... even though I said earlier that banks have customers from 18 to 80, 90, you can't speak to 18 to 90 in one piece of content, you have to break that up and this is where categories come in. This is where different posts come in. This is where different videos come in or whatever it is you are doing, you need to focus on one segment per post, per video, per audio, per blog posts.

James Robert Lay:

How do you help others that you're working with? Because I'm going to put my CEO hat on at a bank, but I want my content to reach everyone. How do you help other people overcome that FOMO, that fear of missing out? Because really I think it's the FOMO, the fear of missing out that leads to the fear of focus or the lack of focus and so content gets watered down. It doesn't really create any value, it's generic. And I think you're right, the headline, just the headline alone, that's the doorway to the deeper perspective and when you have that clarity of the who of the persona, you can really paint a beautiful door that's welcoming and inviting people in to dive deeper, but without... so how do you help others overcome that FOMO, that fear of missing out of focusing in content around some specific niche market segment?

Shondell Varciana:

Well, you can focus on multiple niches at the same time. I'm not saying only focus on 20 to 30 year olds. You can focus on 20 to 30 year olds, 30 to 40 year olds, 40 to 50 years. You can focus on all of them at the same time, but they have to be focused on with different pieces of content is what I'm saying. So if your team is big enough, you can post as much as you want, really. You can post 25, 30 pieces a day but they need to be very specific.

Shondell Varciana:

So it shouldn't be a blanket approach, right? It needs to be very tailored. So all of these pieces need to be speaking to each of your target markets. It's all how you look at it rather than looking at it as, "Oh, I only have to focus on one particular audience." No I'm saying focus on one particular audience per post, per audio, per video. Because if you focus on multiple audiences, you will lose them based on the example that I just gave you before. I'm a first time home buyer and you're a repeat buyer. You and I have two completely different questions, but you can still post two different posts, one for you and one for me, but mine will say something completely different than you because they're talking to me and they're talking to you, but they can publish at the same time.

James Robert Lay:

You just said something really key. If your team is big enough, you can post 20, 25, 30 different pieces of content per day. Once again, I'm going to put my CEO hat on, you just gave me anxiety. How are we going to create that type of scale? Because I'm a CEO and I have a small marketing team of five people and they're not at all doing content, maybe I have someone they're dabbling in this stuff. What's the way to get that scale ability? Because as James Robert now I see that opportunity, but how can we help create that scale of that 20, 25, 30 pieces of content per day, that go out to these different audience segments that speak specifically into their hearts and mind?

Shondell Varcianna:

Well, I don't like doing a shameless plug, but that's the common problem that our customers have. So they outsource the content writing to us. Because we have a larger team, they don't have to hire us as employees and things like that. So, and we're really heavily focused on financial institutions. So that is one way you can outsource it if you don't have the manpower. Now keep in mind too, that one piece of content can be repurposed 12 different ways. So you don't have to look at... and I always tell our clients and push this heavily. Let's say for example, we write a thousand word blog posts for one of our clients, that could be broken into 12 social media posts.

Shondell Varcianna:

So repurposing content is huge, especially if you've got long form content. So you can turn that into audio, we've even taken audio and turn that into written word. We've taken video and turn that into written word. You can take snippets of it and turn that into social media posts. So think of it that way as well, especially if you have a smaller team and you're wanting to maximize the content that you do have, you can also look at old content that you have and make it current. So there's many things you can do just to repurpose the content and make it valuable to today's audience.

James Robert Lay:

And so you're echoing some of the perspective that was shared by Marcus Sheridan in episode number 83, when we were talking about his book, They Ask You Answer. And it's a great book and it really is about operationalizing this and so your thinking is, and I agree with you, don't let the lack of either A, capability or B, capacity prevent you from leveraging the power of content at scale because you're right, that 1000 word article or that 1500 word article that will help with organic SEO reach that creates a long tail value over time to generate leads can be broken up into smaller content assets that are then repurpose and so it's almost like it's a gift that essentially could keep on giving.

Shondell Varcianna:

Think outside of the box and be creative, and some other things that you can do are quick videos are wonderful, if you've got a small team, each of them could post a quick video, then you could expand on that and create a long form blog posts. Then you can take snippets of that and post it on social media. You could even record a five minute video and break that into 32nd segments and post that six times.

James Robert Lay:

See, and this is all about content operations and this is... been a big part of the training and the education that we've been doing, because it really is. I think back to your points about transforming and shifting the mindset of marketing for marketing to be viewed as more of a media publication activity, as opposed to just going out and buying ads because if we have to think back historically, that's what has driven marketing specifically in financial brands, it was the madman TV approach to... you buy an ad and then that was it and then this is a much more active approach to marketing, but it's also involving other people from other areas of the organization, you mentioned video. You can tap into other subject matter experts that can share their knowledge, their areas of expertise. When we're thinking about this, what might be some challenges? What might be some road blocks for financial brands they'll have to overcome as

they're moving forward along this journey, and just think about some of the work that you've been doing with your clients over the years. Things that they've had to overcome?

Shondell Varcianna:

Roadblocks is compliance for sure. But so what I always recommend is heavily meeting with compliance and find out where we can work within the boundaries, because that's the best place to start. It doesn't make sense to get creative and then out of compliance. So it's better to sit with compliance and say, "Okay, what can we do? And then let's get creative within the scope of what is allowed versus thinking about what's not allowed." There's so many ways to get creative, it's just a matter of... again, it is a huge mindset shift but I would just say... and it really depends on what your goal is, who are you trying to talk to? What product are you trying to push? Okay, so based on what compliance is saying, now let's look at an overall strategy. Because sometimes we need to go all the way back and figure out what your ideal client even wants, because not knowing what they want doesn't even make sense to put any content out there.

Shondell Varcianna:

You have to know who your target audience is, and you have to know them extremely well. And a tip, one way to find out what they want in my opinion is to join Facebook groups. Facebook groups are huge to get to know your ideal customer and I'll give you an example, let's say you are focused on first-time home buyers. There are so many first time home buyer groups on Facebook, but just be a fly on the wall and take 20 minutes per day, join one of these groups and take 20 minutes per day and listen, that's it. You will gain so much insight on what your ideal customer wants because everyone in that group is wanting to buy a home. So, it's just... and a lot of your customers are there. So if you show up where they are and just be a fly on the wall and just listen, oh my goodness, that's just invaluable insight right there.

James Robert Lay:

And you're right. And that's an acronym that we teach when it comes to... for example, persona development, to go all in on people. You ask, you listen, and you learn. And it's through those lessons that you can put together a content strategy that is not about you, the financial brand, and that takes you down a path of narcissistic marketing.

Shondell Varcianna:

Yes, it's never about you ever.

James Robert Lay:

And the opportunity is to play the role of the helpful guide with narrative structure. The Obi-Wan Kenobi is the [mistimi 00:21:21] I use of the world, and so when it comes to these opportunities here. What have been some of the wins, the value creation, because as I introduced you was really about generating inbound leads because otherwise what's the point? What value are we creating? If a tree falls in the woods, does it make a sound? If you produce a piece of content and fail to promote it, does it create value? Does it generate leads? So let's talk about value creation. What have you seen from the work that you've been doing?

Shondell Varcianna:

So we are one aspect of the overall marketing strategy, because we're just focused on the written word, but I do have a lot of experience with SEO and things like that. So I usually will

chime in on what I think will be beneficial so the content actually converts. So yeah, I usually start with them finding out exactly what their target audience is talking about. Once they get to know their target audience, then I'm going to start asking them, what are they talking about? What are some of the misconceptions that they have? What are some of the pain points that they have? Now, let's start writing about those pain points and post them not only on your social media site, but we're also going to post that on your website. Because if they want to dig a little bit deeper than they can go onto your website, and now we want them to subscribe on your website.

Shondell Varcianna:

We also want to provide them with some freebies, because at the end of the day, you want to control your audience. You do not want social media to control your audience. Social media is just a tool to bring your audience into your funnel, into your house, into your playground. Once we come into your playground that you want to keep them engaged. So you have to have some freebies. You have to have enough valuable information so that they will want to subscribe, so that they'll want to download your checklist, your guide, your... whatever it is you have and then they get into your funnel. Now you can control the audience and now you can provide them with even more valuable information. Now you're still in these Facebook groups, listening to what it is they're saying. Now we start to create a content strategy.

Shondell Varcianna:

So based on what they're saying, we're going to produce some content but not only that, is now we're going to take a look at keywords based on what they're talking about. What are they also searching for on Google? Then we're going to mirror those two and create some content by using those keywords. So now we've got a little bit of a search engine optimization strategy to create the content. I'm also big on paying for ads as well, because you just hit more people faster when you do PPC ads, when you're doing the Facebook ads. So I'm a proponent of all of it, we just focused on the written word. But in order to just blast the visibility with value, you do need to be as many places as quickly as possible and consistently as possible. So that's in a nutshell.

James Robert Lay:

I think what you just said is key. Two points that I wanted to bring back for the dear listener. Number one, it's about driving traffic from social media to your own properties. And then from there, it's about email acquisition, because social media... a great analogy of this, that a lot of financial brand marketing sales and leadership teams connect with it's like cable network TV. If you want to reach a cable audience, you have to pay to get access to that audience, and so that's number one. And then number two, this idea of paying the play. For every dollar that you spend to produce a piece of content, I recommend at least putting a dollar behind that to promote that piece of content, if not even more because now you're getting into targeted marketing, targeted advertising efforts that you can come back and even repurpose it as some type of an email nurturing drip campaign.

James Robert Lay:

And so it's all of these little pieces that come together. And if you start removing these different elements and that's what I see a lot of times is, they've got the writing down but it's needing to support those efforts with all of everything else, because otherwise it's like the good work that you and your team are doing, it's hard to then quantify that in the greater scale, in the greater

scope. There's a financial brand that we've been advising for probably the past five or six years, and they actually brought someone in house to... that was their sole job, they were a content strategists. They started writing content and you see organic search traffic to their blog go from a thousand before, 3000 when they joined, which was, I think mid year of 2019 or 2018, that then grew to 30,000, 50,000. And then this year they're looking at a 100,000 visits to blog articles only, and not blog articles.

James Robert Lay:

Those blog articles are now being optimized for additional lead capture because that's an asset that they now own, that's... because imagine how much you would have to pay to drive a 100,000 visits if you were paying for PPC or any other type, just assign a \$3 cost per click, that's a \$300,000 investment just to drive that traffic. And what's better than that is because when you're talking about the organic search, people are actively typing in.

James Robert Lay:

So it's a much more qualified visit as opposed to say someone who's just clicking on an ad. And so that's the quantification too that I think when you look at your content strategy at the larger spectrum and scale, these are the things and then from there it's obviously generating leads, that's a whole nother aspect. But yeah, I think even putting a dollar amount to... if we could buy traffic, you're owning this now, it's an asset and what's happened is this individual's gotten so busy. I basically made the recommendation, you need to start working with outside writers and take the strategy because there's a world full of who's like you, who can bridge not capability but I think at this point, it's a capacity gap.

Shondell Varcianna:

Yeah, absolutely. And it's so important that... and the reason why I'm big on doing all of it, like the ads as well as the organic is, because the organic helps for the longevity. And then it helps you to control your audience, because Google, Facebook they can change prices anytime they change... Google changes their algorithms all the time, I'm sure you know as well as Facebook. So you need to just use these as tools and then you have to be able to control your audience, because if you're not able to control your audience and all of your audiences, just on social media, you can lose them, that could end up being wasted effort. And at the end of the day, you can control more of what's on your website than you can on your social media sites.

James Robert Lay:

It's the irony. The irony to me is why in 2021 are financial brands still interested in growing a Facebook audience from say a 1000 to 10,000 or 10,000 to a 100, 000? I'm like, because you're still only going to get two to 3% organic reach. So it's like for every 10,000, you're lucky if you get eyeballs from two to 300 people. So...

Shondell Varcianna:

Yeah. And you've got a post for... You're absolutely right, some brands they're posting 10, 15 times a day, that's what it takes. Some of the digital marketing guru suggest 20 to 25 times per day. And the reason why they say that is because that is what it takes for even a small percentage to see your content, if you're not doing any type of ads, it's just so noisy. So you have to find a way to get in between that noise and get your value across to your ideas-

James Robert Lay:

Yeah, because you're competing with cat videos and all the other distractions of the world. And I want to come back to that 10 to 15 times per day, upwards of 20 to 25 times posting on social media. And obviously it's going to be channel specific, but this has been a fantastic conversation Shondell, a lot of practicality for actions that someone is listening they can take to up their content game. I always like to end to get really specific because I think when you look at this idea of transforming minds, transforming behaviors, transforming habits, it all starts with a small micro commitment, nothing too big but just something small. What is a small recommendation that you would make to someone listening? Who's looking at maximizing their content efforts out their financial brand. What is something small that they can start doing today, even going forward?

Shondell Varciana:

I would say a start, depending on where you are. I would say be a fly on a wall and join a Facebook group that one of your target audience is hanging out at, that doesn't take much time. And I don't say... oh, and another tip with the Facebook groups is you want to join Facebook groups that have the most number of people and are the most active. So you can get the best bang for your time. I don't suggest spending more than 20 minutes because we can get lost in them.

Shondell Varciana:

I don't suggest spending more than 20 minutes in them a day, you don't need to join a whole bunch too at the max. Once you search, we use the example of first-time home buyers. Once you search that, you'll see all of them come up and then look for the ones that have the most amount of people and have the most activity. So they'll tell you how many posts they do per day. You want to join the ones that do the most posts because, then you'll see more activity and what you're looking for is patterns. You're looking for similar questions. You're looking for similar misconceptions. You're looking for similar pain points because that will give you an idea of what the bulk of the people are thinking.

James Robert Lay:

And that is how you go all in. That is how you ask. That is how you listen, and that is how you learn. And that is how you can inform your next steps with the content that you can produce. Shondell, if someone is listening, they want to continue this conversation. They want to follow up with you personally. What is the best way for them to reach out, to connect with you to say hello?

Shondell Varciana:

I'm on LinkedIn all the time, because that's where my ideal customer is. So you can reach out to me on LinkedIn. My handle is Shondell Varciana everywhere. So, but LinkedIn is where I'm most active.

James Robert Lay:

Yeah, and she is extremely active. She is sharing a lot of knowledge. She's practicing what she believes and I thank you for that Shondell, and also thank you for joining me on another episode of Banking On Digital Growth.



Shondell Varciana:

Thank you so much for having me. I had a wonderful time.

James Robert Lay:

This was a lot of fun, as always and until next time be well, do good and make your bed.