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Understanding digital content marketing

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Abstract This article argues that as the importance of digital content to business and society grows it is important seek a holistic perspective on the definition and nature of digital content marketing (DCM). Along the journey it becomes evident that a recurrent theme in DCM is customer value, and this leads into the second major contribution of the article, an exploration of the notion of customer value in digital content marketplaces. Digital content is defined as: 'bit-based objects distributed through electronic channels'. A structured analysis is conducted on the basis of a set of questions in order to surface some of the unique characteristics of digital content marketing. The analysis is informed by a literature review, and the exploration of numerous web sites which deliver different types of digital content. The conclusion summarises the unique characteristics of digital content, and associated consequences for digital content marketing. It focuses on the impact of the difficulty in developing a notion of 'value' in the context of digital content, and its consequences for value chain structures, pricing strategies, marketing communications and branding, and licensing and digital rights management. In addition, the customer's experience of digital content is influenced by all stakeholders in the value chain as well as requiring the customer to participate in learning and co-creation of the experience. The potential of the 'value-in-use' notion of customer value as a basis for ensuring that consumers are fully engaged as stakeholders in the content economy is discussed. On this basis recommendations for practice and further research are developed.

Keywords Digital content marketing, Internet marketing

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INTRODUCTION

Koiso-Kanttila (2004) introduces the concept of digital content marketing, or the marketing of products in which both the entity and the delivery of the product are digital; such digital content is an increasingly important part of the commercial landscape. Swatman et al (2006) refer to this as the "digital content market". According to the Nielsen Net Ratings (www.nielsen-netratings.com/pr/pr_050913.pdf) the top ten Web companies include a number of portals and other companies that trade in digital content. Within Francis and White (2004)'s taxonomy of e-commerce, such products occupy the cell identified as goods, with an electronic fulfilment process (Figure 1). There has been considerable research on the marketing issues associated with the other three cells, specifically in areas such as online retailing (e.g. Cao and Zhao 2004; Chen and Chang 2003; Gouriaris et al. 2005; Holloway and Beatty 2003; Janda et al. 2002; Lee and Lin 2005; Wolfinbarger and Gilly 2002), online banking (e.g. Al-Hawari and Ward 2006; Bauer et al. 2005; Jayawardhena 2004; Zhu et al. 2002) and online service and customer support (e.g. Bitner et al. 2002; Croom and Johnston 2002; Janda et al. 2002; Kaynama and Black 2000; Kim et al. 2006; Negash et al. 2003; Parasuraman et al. 2005), but there is a marked paucity of literature on digital content marketing, or related areas such a digital information marketing, digital product marketing, or electronic goods marketing. Koiso-Kanttila (2004) emphasises the need for further research in the area of digital content marketing.

This article makes two different but related contributions to marketing theory and practice. The initial objective was to make a contribution to the debate about the nature of digital content marketing building on and extending the seminal contribution by Kosio-Kantilla, specifically by considering the marketplace and its dynamics across a wide range of categories of digital content with a view to understanding the inherent characteristics of digital content and the consequences for the marketing of digital content. In this context, the article also seeks to draw together earlier work on specific types of digital content, such as music and newspapers and magazines. The article builds the argument for acknowledgement that the marketing of digital content is different in a number of respects to the marketing of other services and products due to the elusive nature of its core component, information. The digitisation of content has had significant consequences for the software, media and publishing industries.

The second contribution to marketing theory and practice emerges from the analysis embedded in the article. Customers have difficulty in fixing notions of "value" in relation to digital content. This raises concerns about the fragility of the

FIGURE 1 Fulfilment-product classification scheme (Francis and White 2004)

Product	**Fulfilment Process**	
	Offline	**Electronic**
Goods	**Offline-Goods** e.g. books, clothing, DVD's, groceries	**Electronic-Goods** e.g. Software, MP3's. digital periodicals, electronic art
Services	**Offline-Services** Airline tickets, travel, hotels, event tickets	**Electronic Services** e.g. share trading, adult chat sites, astrology readings

core marketing concept of "customer value". The consequences for stakeholders in the digital content marketplace are discussed alongside consideration of the different perspectives on the essence of customer value.

The next section briefly reviews the main literature on the digital content marketplace and digital content marketing. The approach taken to the structured analysis and its themes are outlined in the following section. The body of the paper works through a series of questions that seek to explore the nature of digital content and the consequences that this has for its marketing. The conclusion summarises the unique characteristics of digital content, and associated consequences for digital content marketing. It focuses on the impact of the difficulty in developing a notion of "value" in the context of digital content, and its consequences for value chain structures, pricing strategies, marketing communication and branding, and licensing and digital rights management. In addition, the customer's experience of digital content is influenced by all stakeholders in the value chain as well as requiring the customer to participate in learning and co-creation of the experience. The potential of the "value-in-use" notion of customer value as a basis for ensuring that consumers are fully engaged as stakeholders in the content economy is discussed. On this basis recommendations for practice and further research are developed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Kosio-Kantilla (2004) restricted her study to digital nautical charts for recreational yatchmen, but the primary focus in the literature on the digital content marketplace has been on the relevant business models for success in the music and newspaper and magazine industries (e.g. Amit and Zott 2001; Berry 2006; Fetscherin and Knolmayer 2004; Kaiser 2006; Palmer and Eirken 2000; Premkumar 2003; Swatman et al. 2006; Vaccaro and Cohn 2004). A preoccupation in both sectors has been the cannibalisation of the business models associated with traditional channels through the availability of digital content. Other more specific concerns relate to the impact of peer-to-peer file sharing, and CD burning on music sales and the free availability of news content on newspaper revenues (Andersson and Rosenqvist 2006; Clemens et al. 2002; Fetscherin and Knolmayer 2004; Kaiser 2006; Peitz and Waelbroeck 2004). Businesses are trialling different business models (Picard 2002; Swatman et al. 2006). Key issues include:

- the extent to which digital content producers are simply producers of content or intermediaries who must identify and serve customer needs (Bartussek 2001). This will depend on the partnerships that content providers forge in the supply chain; the content industry is very dependent on the end devices by which content is delivered to customers, and associated payment mechanisms. Accordingly there are a number of options for partnerships with ISP's, Telcos, and other technology companies, such as Microsoft and Apple (Swatman et al. 2006).

- the relationship between online and offline offerings where both are offered in parallel. Stahl et al. (2004) suggest that market share cannibalisation occurs when the same content is offered on and off-line. Swatman et al. (2006) found that most of the online news suppliers believed that their online presence was part of increasing the reputation of their offline brand, although they saw the future potential of online adverting revenue and paid content as interesting.

The optimum business model for many providers of digital content is likely to depend on achieving a balance between their portfolios delivered through different channels. There is however a general agreement that both in the online news sector and in the online music sector that there is a high level of uncertainty about future business models, although in the music industry at least there is some evidence of a high level of optimism that new business models will emerge (Swatman et al. 2006). Convergence in the online content sector is an important process, with former media, telecommunication and technology companies moving into the online content business.

Research into the marketplace for and the marketing of digital content is then, limited, and primarily restricted to concerns about two types of content, online music and online news and magazines. Further, although a couple of research projects have investigated both of these sectors in one project, there are limited attempts to generalise and to understand the extent to which the fundamental characteristics of digital content impact in all digital content marketplaces. Finally, the focus is on business models, or, in other words, on how businesses can generate revenue, with little mention of the customer and customer needs and expectations. Where customers do feature, as in the music sector, the focus tends to be on regulating and controlling customer behaviour through digital rights management technologies and regulation, rather than understanding it and working with it (Umeh 2007).

As is evident from the analysis that follows, one of the key issues in the marketing of digital content is getting the customer to pay:

> *The Internet consumer is accustomed to free information*
>
> (Swatman et al. 2006, p.64)

Customer perceptions of the value of digital and information content are inherently volatile. The concept of "customer value" which is related in turn to the "value chain" is pivotal to present day notions of marketing. One very important signal of the wide acceptance of the value concept is its incorporation into a revised version of the American Marketing Association's definition of marketing:

> *Marketing is an organisational function and a set of processes for creating, communicating and delivering value to customers and for managing customer relationships in ways that benefit the organisation and its stakeholders*
>
> (Gronroos 2006, p.397)

Several marketing strategists emphasise that the creation of superior customer value is a key element for ensuring companies' success (Cravens et al. 1997; Higgins 1998; Huber 2001; Porter 1996; Reichheld et al. 2000). In much of the literature on business models there is also reference to value and the value chain; here the term is often particularly loosely used, and the stakeholders who create and participate in the value chain often ill-defined. However there are two important challenges in embracing the concept of customer value in research or practice. First and foremost, as Khalifa (2004) and Gronroos (2006), from different perspectives, both ably demonstrate there are several notions of the nature of customer value, and the concept is overused and misused (Khalifa 2004). Further although there is a general agreement that value is "*not what the producer puts in, but 'what the customer gets out*" (Doyle 1989, p.78), because "what the customer gets out" is difficult for the business to understand or manage marketing perceptions of customer value too often tend to slip back into "what the producer puts in" mode. The other issue is that in e-business marketplaces in general, and in digital content markets, in particular, the value equation is being re-defined (Mahajan and Wind 2003). New pricing models and broader definitions of value that extend beyond product and price to factors such as novelty, control and speed present a particular challenge.

APPROACH

The central research questions posed in this article are:

- What are the underlying characteristics shared by all categories of digital content? and
- What are the consequences of those underlying characteristics for the marketing of digital content?

This article is written in the form of a structured analysis. The analysis is informed by a literature review, and the exploration of numerous web sites which deliver different types of digital content. The article draws on the author's considerable experience with, and earlier investigations on, the marketing of a wide range of digital information and digital content over an extended period of time. The questions that structure the article and the theory making process are:

1. What is digital content marketing?
2. What is the relationship between information and marketing in digital channels?
3. What is the nature of digital content as a product?
4. How is digital content delivered to the consumer?
5. How is digital content priced?
6. How is marketing communication, and branding different for digital content?

These questions work through the marketing mix (McCarthy 1960) including considerations of product, place, promotion, and price, and surface some of the unique characteristics of digital content marketing. The conclusion focuses on the impact of the difficulty in developing a notion of "value" in the context of digital content. Other key characteristics of digital content marketing are also outlined.

WHAT IS DIGITAL CONTENT MARKETING?

Before proceeding it is important to define the term "digital content" more precisely, and to explain the relationship between digital content and digital information. Following Koiso-Kantilla (2004) we use digital content and digital product interchangeably in this article, and adopt her definition:

> *Digital content and digital products are conceptualised as bit-based objects distributed through electronic channels*
>
> (p.46)

For digital products, both the distribution process and the actual commodity acquired are digital (Strader and Shaw 2000). Examples of digital products are online news, electronic journals, e-books, virtual pets, online health advice, databases, online directories, mobile micro movies, games, music downloads, and software package updates.

Kosio-Kantilla (2004) suggests that the terms "electronic information products" and "information goods" are alternative terms to those of digital content and digital product. Others have conceptualised e-service as information service (Rust and Lemon, 2001), since the primary value exchanged between the two parties is information, and there is evidence to suggest that the common perception of the Internet is that it is used mainly to gratify the need for information (Ducoffe 1996; Eighmey 1997; Korgaonkar and Wolin 1999; Molesworth and Jenkins 2002; Schlosser et al. 1999). On this basis we propose that digital content and digital information products are synonymous terms. Information products have been defined by Rowley (2002) as:

> *An information product is any product (either good or service) whose core or primary product is information or knowledge.*

It is important to note that not all information products are digital, and not all information products are goods. Digital content therefore relates to the category of information products that are goods (rather than services) and that are electronic (rather than print). Nevertheless, this alignment between digital content and digital information products suggests that in understanding the essential nature of digital content it may be useful to draw on the literature on the nature of information and information products. Further, the literature on information marketing may provide some conceptual insights that might usefully inform consideration of digital content marketing.

Another important relationship is that between digital content marketing and e-marketing, Internet marketing, web marketing, and related disciplines. Given that much digital content marketing is through online channels it is reasonable to suppose that there is a good degree of overlap between digital content marketing and e-marketing. On the other hand, digital content marketing is not strictly a sub-field of e-marketing because digital content is not only marketed through e-channels. From a taxonomic perspective, e-marketing is a branch of marketing communication, and complements other marketing communication mix elements, such as public relations, advertising, and sponsorship. (Although as we shall see, later this might be a little simplistic, because marketing communication, customer relations, consumer behavior and marketing research tend to merge in e-environments). Digital content marketing, on the other hand, in common with services marketing, or the marketing of other specific categories of products, (such as financial services marketing, or fast-moving consumer goods marketing) focuses on the nature of the product that is being marketed, and the consequences of this for marketing opportunities and approaches.

Incorporating these reflections and building on the CIM's definition of marketing, we define digital content marketing thus:

> *Digital content marketing is the management process responsible for identifying, anticipating, and satisfying customer requirements profitably in the context of digital content, or bit-based objects distributed through electronic channels.*

WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INFORMATION AND MARKETING IN DIGITAL CHANNELS?

Information is integral to marketing. Marketing research and consumer behavior is concerned with collecting information about customers and potential customers with a view to enhancing the value of the market exchange for the customer, and thereby the organisation. Marketing communication is concerned with conveying information or messages to customers that might influence their behavior. Products also embed information. Virtually all "actual" goods include information. Simple everyday products, such as a loaf of bread, have ingredients, branding and contact details on their packaging. More complex goods, such as televisions, white goods or PCs may be accompanied by complex handbooks. Such information is integral to the customer gaining optimum benefit from the product. Services also often include information. For example, a hairdresser may explain how to manage a hair style, whilst a bank manager may provide both financial information (interest rates, investment and loan options) and advice relating to optimal choices.

The difference in the digital channel is that information becomes the dominant element in the marketing exchange (Janal 1998). For digital content, both the marketing communication and the product are information. The boundary between marketing communication and information product can be fuzzy. Business organisations operating through digital channels provide information or advice (or customer service) as part of their augmented product, or to lubricate the relationship between the consumer, retailer, or other intermediaries, and the producer. Product information, often extending beyond the technical details of the product itself (for example: How to take good photographs with your digital camera) has an important role in marketing communications. Further, web portals use information in building communities and attracting attention. Information is a "freebie". For example, tesco.net (www.tesco.net) offers free information on, amongst other topics: food and drink, games and gadgets, health, home and gardens, money, kids and education, news, sport, travel and weather. Flexifoil (www.flexifoil.com), a kite manufacturer, offers free information on kiting techniques and activities to support and grow its online and face-to-face kiting community. Whilst such portals are using information to capture and retain customers, other providers of similar digital content might be seeking to charge for similar information (in digital or print form) on a payment, pay-per view or subscription basis. Other information suppliers may offer some information free (such as the abstracts of a collection of journal articles), but charge for further information. Recent innovations by Amazon.com are their "Look Inside" and "Search Inside" the book, features that present extracts from the print book as digital content to promote the sales of the book. The picture is further obscured by the many public sector organisations that offer, for example, health information, for free, for the public good, and communities of interest or practice that make information available for free to members, and support the sharing of information between members.

In a knowledge economy, information is pervasive. Digital content can be used both as an attractor in marketing communication, and as a product at the heart of the marketing exchange. This has consequences for the whole marketing exchange. These consequences commence with the nature of the information products and the benefits that consumers perceive such products to offer, and embrace pricing, or what consumers will pay, and marketing communications, as the basis for persuasion and the formulation of notions of value.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF DIGITAL CONTENT AS A PRODUCT?

As discussed earlier digital content is information, so as a product it shares the essential characteristics of information. Freiden et al. (1998) argue that the unique nature of information as a product demands a new approach to marketing, which they describe as information marketing. Discussion of the special nature of information products can range through some of the characteristics that are unique to information, to those that have been used to differentiate between goods and services: perishability; homogeneity; inseparability; and intangibility (PZB 1985). Drawing on contributions from earlier work on the nature of information (Eaton and Bawden 1991; Freiden et al. 1998; Rowley 2002) and the nature of digital content (Kosio-Kanttila 2004), digital content is proposed to exhibit the following characteristics:

1. **Value is contextual** Digital content has no intrinsic value. Its value depends upon its context and its use by particular users on specific occasions, and cannot be determined in advance. It is also difficult to predict how the value will change over time. The contextual nature of value impacts on the notion of value, which in turn influences whether people are prepared to pay at all for an information product, and if they are willing to pay, the payment mode and level that they deem to be acceptable. Such issues are fundamental to the economic structure of the digital content industry.
2. **Reproducibility and multiplicability** Digital content is not lost when it is given to others, although its usefulness for particular purposes may be reduced. Nor does it diminish when 'consumed'; its sharing and transmission may, and indeed almost always will, cause its increase. In economic terms, then, information, and digital content has a self-multiplicative quality, since its exchange does not necessarily imply redistribution, loss or consumption. This characteristic of information is supported by its reproducibility. Digital content may be easily, sometimes too easily replicated. For example, Huang (2005) discusses file sharing in music. This leads to preoccupation with controls on use, with much of the literature on digital content centering on the management of intellectual property rights and security (e.g. Fotopoulos et al. 2004; Kang et al. 2005; Ko et al. 2005; Umeh 2007).
3. **Interactivity** Information is a dynamic force for change to the systems within which it operates and must be viewed within an organisation as a formative, organising entity rather than as an accumulated stockpile of facts. Information is not, then, something that an organisation acquires in the way that it might acquire other products. It is often acquired so that it can be integrated with information from other sources, and either used to inform decision-making, plans and actions, or to create other information products. At an individual level, information is integral to the learning process, and its use enhances the learner's cognitive ability to absorb other information. Interactivity has consequences for the context of use.
4. **Repackageability** Digital content comes in many different forms, and is expressed in many ways. For example, one unit of content, such as an image, may be accessible through a number of web pages. Several different digital products may be generated from one database to meet the needs of various audiences. Since new digital content is often created by developing existing content, it can be difficult to decide when content is original or different. Further many digital products, such as electronic journals and electronic books are developed from print products; although the core product may be information, the actual and

augmented products generated from, say, a database or a document can deliver quite different functionality and benefits.

5. **Delivery and technology** Technology constrains and facilitates the delivery of digital content. Different digital content can be delivered to different workstations depending on network bandwidths, and capacity to interpret complex images, graphics, animation and video. Mobile technologies currently offer access to a more limited range of digital content, and digital content in specified formats.
6. **Perishability** Digital content does not deteriorate over time (permanence), although the medium in which it is stored may do so. On the other hand, the value of content can vary with time. Content can, in some cases, have multiple lifecycles, as ideas, styles, and cultural experiences come into, move out of, and finally come back into, fashion. The uncertainty associated with how long information is of value after it has been created, distributed and even purchased provokes the collection and archiving of information.
7. **Homogeneity** Digital content is at the extreme end of the homogeneity spectrum, since each copy is identical to each other copy, and to the original.
8. **Inseparability** Digital content is more akin to a good than a service in that it is produced, stored, transported and can exist without being consumed.
9. **Tangibility** The only tangible element of digital content is the medium through which it is conveyed when it is packaged into, say, a DVD or a CD-ROM. Thus, the core product, information, is intangible, although some types of digital content may be packaged into actual products that have a limited level of tangibility.

HOW IS DIGITAL CONTENT DELIVERED TO THE CONSUMER?

By definition delivery of digital content is through the electronic channel, typically the Internet. Typically the "place" element of the marketing mix or the channel through which the product is delivered to customers has two interlinked dimensions: the supply chain and the customer experience of that supply chain; and, the e-service nature of the point of interaction with the customer. Both of these need to be considered separately:

The supply chain, and the user experience of that supply chain

The supply chain or the channel of distribution is "*a group of individuals and organisations that direct the flow of products from producers to customers*" (Dibb et al. 2005). Umeh (2007) suggests that the digital content supply chain or value chain involves five groups of stakeholders: creative stakeholders (such as authors, artists, composers, programmers, and designers), legal/legislative/governance stakeholders (such as IP lawmakers, governments, standards organisations, and lobby groups), commercial stakeholders (such as publishers, distributors, broadcasters, film companies, and music companies), technology stakeholders (such as IT companies, DRM vendors, software/hardware vendors, and device makers), and consumer/end-user stakeholders (consumers of music, film, literature, and software). Here the primary focus is on the interface between commercial stakeholders (content providers and distributors) and consumer/end-user stakeholders. Jallat and Capek (2001) suggest that intermediaries, such as publishers and distributors can have a consumer reassurance role. In some cases, such as with ring tones or the acquisition of e-books, or MP3 downloads where consumers pay for the acquisition of the item, distributors manage the interface between the publisher and the consumer. Search engines can be used to identify distributors and intelligent agents can be used by the consumer to search across the web sites of several distributors. In other instances, libraries and document supply agencies act as intermediaries. Such intermediaries deliver the digital content of e-books, and e-journal articles to the consumer. Figure 2 shows a simple supply chain for digital journals. Starting with a publisher, such as Blackwell's, pricing and access is negotiated through the JISC CHEST consortia (for UK academic libraries), and end-user access is managed by libraries, on behalf of their consumer communities. Importantly the consumer's capacity to locate and access this kind of digital content is crucially dependent on intermediaries. An analysis of the intermediaries that a typical user is likely to encounter in locating an electronic document creates an experience chain. Consumers seeking, for example, a digital journal article need first to locate a supplier for that article. Their search may start with a known article, and may involve simply the identification of an appropriate supplier. In this instance if they know the publisher they may go direct to the publishers website (or through a search engine, such as Google to the publishers web site), and pay to download the article. If, on the other hand they wish to take advantage of a licence arrangement through a library, or they know only the subject on which they seek articles, and they are a member of a community which allows them access to this digital content for "free" their search will start with a library web site. Figure 3 identifies the elements of such an experience. From the library web site the user might search a bibliographic database, such as ISI Web of Knowledge to identify relevant journal articles. They may then click on a number of publisher's databases, such as Blackwell's Synergy, or Elsevier's Science Direct to access the full text of an article. Some of the articles that they seek will not be available under their library's license arrangements, and others will only be available in print form. These articles, if they are deemed sufficiently important will need to be pursued through other channels. The process of collecting all of the digital documents to support a task is complex and often involves many intermediaries and publishers; the total user experience may be protracted and involve considerable effort on the part of the consumer.

In summary, in accessing digital content, the consumer experience is dependent upon a complex web of relationships in the marketing channel. Unlike in other retail contexts the user is directly interacting with a variety of organisations in the user experience chain through the web sites of those organisations. Those web sites

FIGURE 2 The marketing channel for digital journal articles

Publishers → Purchasing consortia → University Library → Consumer

FIGURE 3 The user experience chain for digital journal articles

User → Library website → Bibliographic database → Publisher have an important role in directing the user towards the digital content that meets their requirements and the design and experience of those web sites influences the success of the user in identifying appropriate digital content. Delivery is not only in partnership, but the partnerships are transparent to the consumer. Successful relationships with consumers are pivotally dependent on the final link in the chain, but are also dependent on user interactions through the websites that represent other elements in their experience chain. The marketing channel needs to be viewed both at the operational level and at the service experience level. This has consequences for marketing communications and branding, as discussed below.

In addition, it is not possible to discuss the marketing exchange associated with digital content without reference to the search and locate process. The large numbers of digital documents and objects makes the identification of the most appropriate document much more complex than it is for the identification of many services (where locality may constrain options especially in relation to p-services), and products where market factors and international trade constraints reduce the number of options available to an individual consumer.

The e-service nature of the point of interaction with the consumer

The e-service nature of the point of interaction with the consumer means that the "place" element of the marketing mix is somewhat impoverished at the customer interface (Zeithaml et al. 2000) and delivery can be described as e-service, which in turn has been conceptualised as self-service (Dabholkar 2003; Sara 2000).

E-service has been defined as web-based service (Reynolds 2000) or interactive services that are delivered on the Internet (Boyer et al. 2002). Rowley (2006) defines e-service as:

> *E-service is deeds, efforts or performances whose delivery is mediated by information technology (including the Web, information kiosks and mobile devices). Such e-service includes the service element of e-tailing, customer support and service, and service delivery.*

In e-services the customer's interaction or contact with the organisation is through the technology, such as the web site. In e-service, the technology is a constant factor, which is sometimes supported by communication with human service agents, via e-mail and other means. During an e-service encounter, customers have to rely on sight and sound, whereas the traditional service experience can use all senses. The absence of face-to-face interaction may impair relationship development (Schultze 2003). On the other hand, e-service, unlike traditional service, is not constrained by distance and opening hours, and thus delivers convenience, accessibility and a greater level of customer control. The customer is presented with clearly defined choices in relation to a number of characteristics of the service experience with which they engage.

The self-service nature of e-service requires that customers learn "the script" that applies in specific contexts. Further, in e-service, customers must learn from the interface, or from more experienced colleagues or friends; this learning is not supported by a human service agent. Both during the early stages of learning and later the way that the customer experiences a service may be significantly influenced by their own performance. This could have unpredictable consequences for customer expectations and evaluations of service quality. Customers are likely to evaluate a service experience positively if the interface defines the customer role in a way that is congruent with the customer's knowledge, capabilities and self image.

The need for customer engagement and learning means that organisations need to go beyond good web design and clear instructions and navigation to develop an understanding of the learning processes that they expect of their customers for successful engagement in e-service. They need to find ways of aligning those learning processes with customer inclinations, knowledge and learning styles and approaches, and of facilitating relevant customer learning.

In many contexts relating to the delivery of digital documents users engage with both e-service and p-service delivery. E-service is often part of a wider service delivery. It is necessary to consider e-service alongside other channels through which service can be delivered, including face-to-face, telephone, postal, and other remote services. The following key characteristics of documents, information and their delivery impact on the e-service experience:

- *Format and delivery* – Information and documents are available in both electronic and print form, and even where all necessary documents are in electronic form, the user will often print the documents for reading. Format has consequences for delivery channels.
- *Identification of documents and information* – A thorough search will often involve using a number of search engines on different web sites, and using different interfaces and search algorithms.
- *Authentication and access rights* – A major blockage in access to information exists in the form of the access rights that are associated with each channel to information, which for individual users is derived from their membership of an academic, business or other group.

HOW IS DIGITAL CONTENT PRICED?

First and foremost it is important to recognise that as discussed earlier quite a bit of digital content is free to the consumer. Many end-users of digital content whether it be in their role as consumers, employees or citizens are able to draw on a wealth of free information. Price is not necessarily perceived as an indicator of the quality or value of information. Although Rangan and Adner (2001) identify price as one of the key value drivers of digital content, others, such as accuracy, timeliness, completeness, appeal, and interactivity, also feature. In addition, whilst price may be related to the cost structure, the relationship between the two is complex, since for information products indirect costs dominate, and the marginal costs of the creation of additional copies is close to zero.

Where a price is attached to digital information, pricing strategies for electronic information products are complex, and need to accommodate both B2C and B2B marketplaces. Further, there may often be a differentiation between what is been offered for the payment. In some instances there is a transfer of ownership, whilst in others a contract secures access to digital content for a specified period of time under conditions of use specified in a licence.

Digital content may be priced using a range of different pricing strategies:

- **Item Based Pricing** is used for the acquisition of specific digital products such as ringtones or MP3 downloads. In the context of electronic journals, item pricing for viewing and printing specific articles is referred to as pay-per-view or pay-

FIGURE 4 Item-based pricing for a management report

Delivery format	Prices
Print copy/copies	£845, $1310, €1320
Single-user PDF (plus free paper copy)	£995, $1545, €1555
Five-user PDF (plus free paper copy)	£1995, $3095, €3135

Free postage and packing. All prices subject to VAT

per- download. Item based pricing is widely used in B2C marketplaces. Early subscription based models in the digital music industry have been replaced by pay-per-download models (Burker 2007). Even with item based pricing digital content products may be available at different prices in different formats. For example, Figure 4 shows some key aspects of pricing for a management report, which is priced in sterling, euros and US$, and available at different prices depending upon the format in which it is delivered.

- **Subscriptions** Subscriptions have been a well established means of ensuring a more persistent commitment to databases, journals, magazines and newspapers, whether these be in digital or print form, or in print version with supplementary online resources.
- **Contracts and Licences** Access to electronic information, such as large bibliographic databases, electronic journal collections and business, statistical and other databanks is increasingly provided to the end-user through information services acting as intermediaries. In their turn libraries, in both the academic and public sector, have formed consortia, which are increasingly functioning as powerful purchasing consortia, to negotiate with digital information providers, such as publishers and database providers. Contracts, which embrace price, and licensing arrangements, which specify how the information that has been acquired may be used, are agreed and reviewed, typically on an annual basis. Individual libraries, then, have contracts with the consortia for access to all of the negotiated products, or an agreed subset. Such contracts not only make for more straightforward marketing and contracting but also licensing arrangements include controls on the use of the information which ensures protection of intellectual property (Nilsen 2004).

Where licences apply to electronic journals, pricing models rely heavily on bundling. There are two types of bundling:

- Bundling of the electronic journals available from one publisher or group of publishers.
- Bundling of the electronic and print versions of journals. Such bundling means that it is often attractive for libraries to license access to journals for which they would not have chosen to place a separate subscription, because those journals are offered as part of a package.

Electronic books are a more recent entrant to the marketplace and various pricing models are currently being trialed. These include: digitisation fee/purchase; subscription based on number of students enrolled; subscription based on number of concurrent users; fee for printing each page; or fee for access, viewing or usage.

The choice of pricing approaches is dependent on the type of digital content. This variability is driven by the essential repackageability of information coupled with what the consumer or intermediaries operating on behalf of the end-user are prepared to "pay for".

HOW IS MARKETING COMMUNICATION AND BRANDING DIFFERENT FOR DIGITAL CONTENT?

Since much of the marketing communication associated with digital content marketing occurs through online channels, the characteristics of e-marketing communications are pertinent to digital content marketing. Rowley (2004a) argues that marketing communications in online environments is associated with creating presence, creating relationships, and creating value. In other words, as a marketing communications channel, the Internet is distinct from other channels in that relationship and value building are embedded. Service delivery and communication are both information-based and are delivered through the same channel, or web site. May (2000) offers an alternative exposition when he identifies two uses of the word 'channel', and argues that e-commerce is subtly blending these two together:

- In the media world, a channel is a branded carrier of entertainment or information to an audience; the purpose of the channel is to send content to an audience
- In the marketing world, channel means any permanent route to a group of customers; channels are conduits for a company's products and services with consuming populations fitted at their outlets.

FIGURE 5 Creating presence – comparing online and traditional media (based on Janal 1998)

	Traditional media	**Online**
Space	Expensive commodity	Cheap, unlimited
Time	Expensive commodity for marketers	Expensive commodity for users
Image creation	Image is everything Information is secondary	Information is everything Image is secondary
Communication	Push, one-way	Pull, interactive
Call to action	Incentives	Information (incentives)
Audience	Mass	Targeted
Links to further information	Indirect	Direct/embedded
Investment in design	High	Low, allows change
Interactivity	Low	Ranges across a spectrum from low to two-way dialogue.

In virtual channels, the messages communicated through service delivery and marketing communication are tightly coupled. In addition, relationships are built through communication, customer service, customisation (tailoring the offering to deliver value to different customers) and communities. Online transactions automatically create data that can be used to inform relationships with customers, and online communities are arenas in which customers partner with each other and the organisation to add value to the offering that the organisation makes to its customers (Hagel and Armstrong 1997).

Returning to the more traditional arena for marketing communication, creating awareness, or creating presence, there are a number of more practical aspects of e-marketing that differentiate it from marketing through other channels. Janal (1998) summarises the difference between online and traditional channels as shown in Figure 5. The importance of information in marketing communication in this channel, both in terms of image creation, and call to action is evident as is the interactive nature of marketing communication in e-marketing. In addition, marketing communication through digital channels has spawned a number of new techniques and approaches, including: banner ads, portals and search engines, URL's, hyperlinks, traffic building, e-mails, and e-mail newsletter advertisement placement (El-Ansary et al. 2005).

Framing effective and meaningful marketing messages for digital content carries a number of challenges:

- The need to develop more substantial notions of value
- The constraints of the web-site as a marketing communications space
- The need to design and support messages that can be both communicated by formal messages and branding, and through the e-service experience.

In online environments, brands, as in other channels, are seen as central to the relationship with customers, and integrally connected with loyalty, brand messages, values and even personality. All of this needs to be communicated through the web page (Rowley 2004b; Ties and Ries 2000). Not only does the brand message need to be integral to the web site design, but also:

- Brands have a role as search keys in locating the web sites.
- the audience for online brands is less predictable and more diverse than the brand audience encountered through many other channels.
- Online branding needs to be aligned with branding through other channels.

Finally, the user experience chain for digital content involves many organisations, each of which has an associated brand. Each of these product or corporate brands, or nodes in the brand web, has its own corporate identity and brand values. The management of this brand web involves managing meaning and has the potential to provide important new perspectives on partnerships and alliances (Leitch and Richardson 2003).

In conclusion, digital content is promoted and delivered through the same channel. Although in some sense this channel is "just another channel", that channel does have some unique characteristics that need to be accommodated in discussing the marketing of digital content.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article has defined and explored the nature of digital content and its marketing. Digital content has a number of characteristics that derive from its essential nature as information, and the fluid and contextual nature of its value, which suggest that it presents some unique marketing challenges. Certainly, previous researchers and business managers have been pre-occupied with the identification of viable business models for digital content providers in specific sectors such as music, news, and magazines. This article argues that many of the marketing challenges facing stakeholders in the digital content industries are common, and derive from the essential nature of digital content, and the options for "packaging" it into offerings to consumers. In summary these challenges are associated with:

- The difficulty that consumers or users experience in formulating notions of **'value'** for digital content

This in turn lead to:

- Business models in which digital content providers often license content to intermediaries who provide content free to end-users, leading to complex **value chain structures.**
- Great uncertainty about optimum **pricing** strategies and levels that are acceptable to the marketplace
- A focus on **protection** of the interests of digital content providers through licensing and digital right management
- **Marketing communication and branding** has a pivotal role in assisting customers in the formulation of notions of value. Yet, this is a complex environment in which to 'make promises' since the experience and communication must be delivered through the 'small window' of a website, and due to the transparency of the partnerships in the value chain, co-branding needs to be managed creatively.

In addition,

- The **customer's experience** of the content is influenced by all stakeholders in the value chain, including the contribution from the customer themselves, which, in turn, depends on their learning and skills.

We now focus on the first of the above challenges: the difficulty that customers have in establishing "value". Value is elusive and consumers experience difficulty in "fixing" the notion of value, because:

- The essential nature of information means that the value of digital content is contextual, and there is and will be no consensus of the intrinsic value of specific digital products; value is determined by how the digital content is used or experienced by the customer.
- Consumers are accustomed to a weak link between quality and price for digital content, because, for one reason or another, they receive digital content free at the point of use.

- High levels of innovation in some areas of digital products lead to an ever-changing pricing landscape, with few stable reference points, and volatility in pricing levels.

If, as argued by many commentators, (e.g. Cravens et al. 1997; Higgins 1998; Huber et al. 2001; Porter 1996; Reichheld et al. 2000), superior customer value is a key element for ensuring business success then it is essential that digital content providers are able to assist customers in formulating value expectations and associations. The development of a deeper understanding of the development of customer value in the digital content industry, both in general, and in the context of specific sectors is necessary. This will not be an easy process since not only is this a marketplace in which new technological developments are ever offering new opportunities for packaging, customising and accessing digital content, but also, in general, the notion of customer value is still widely debated (Gronroos 2006; Khalifa 2004; Payne and Holt 2001).

Some authors suggest that the debate surrounding the concept of customer value is due to the subjectivity and ambiguity of value which is compounded by the fact that customer value, being a dynamic concept evolves over time (Jaworski and Kohli 1993; Khalifa 2004). Nevertheless there does seem to be some agreement that value is determined by the customer in the marketplace and not by the supplier, or, in other words, value is not what the producer puts in but what the customer gets out (Doyle 1989). Gronroos (2006) describes this as the "value-in–use" notion of customer value creation. Woodruff and Gardial (1996) argue that value attaches to an experience and pertains not to the acquisition of an object, but rather to the consumption of its services (i.e. its use or appreciation). This perspective, which would seem to be eminently appropriate in the digital content marketplace given the contextual nature of information, demands a focus on customers' interactions with the offering (Vargo and Lusch 2004), in this case, digital content, and an enhanced understanding of their value generating processes (Gronroos 2000). Such processes may take place in isolation, or may involve co-creation between the customer and the producer (Norman and Ramirez 1993; Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004). Acceptance of the 'value-in-use' perspective requires the envisioning and creation of contexts which support the co-creation of value. Digital content providers that accept the "value-in-use" philosophy adopt the role of supporting customers' value creation, by providing customers with resources such as goods, services, ideas, information, customer service and payment and invoicing procedures. Marketing involves developing value propositions in the form of various offers, communicating them to customers, and then supporting customers' value creation. Some commentators have seen this as implying that the product is a promise, or a cluster of value expectations (Levitt 1981) and that the economic and other goals of the firm and its customers should be achieved through "exchange and fulfillment of promises", because customers can not experience the product in advance (Calonius 1988; Gronroos 1990; Harker 1999). Arguably most relevant in the context of digital content marketing is the perspective that since users have different expectations and those expectations embrace a collection of explicit and fuzzy implicit expectations, some of which do not turn into explicit expectations until customers experience the product, it is not the promises as such that should be kept, but the individual expectations created by these promises (Ojasalo 1999).

The "value-in-use" perspective on value creation is at odds with the more traditional approach which is based on "value-in-exchange", which implies that value is embedded in the product, which is then delivered to customers for their use (Kotler 1972; Payne and Holt 2001; Porter 1985). Some commentators appear to see these two perspectives on customer value as alternatives, but we argue that businesses need to use both perspectives in tandem, because they offer different types of insights into value creating processes. Digital content producers clearly need to work on perceptions of the value proposition in order to encourage "exchange" in the traditional sense of exchange of value between provider and consumer. Another contribution that emerges from this perspective is the focus that it offers on consumers' perspectives on balancing costs (such as monetary costs, time cost, search costs, and emotional costs) with benefits (Gronroos 1997; Huber et al. 2001; Khalifa 2004). In the context of digital content, costs extend beyond the price paid to the need to engage in self-service, and the learning associated with accessing, using and experiencing digital content. Importantly, also, benefits may be various, depending to some extent on the nature of the digital content, but also on the use to which it is put; the user experience may be focused on education and learning, decision making, or entertainment.

In summary, in the context of digital content marketing at least, a multi-facetted approach to understanding customer value is necessary, and should embrace the consumption values that shape consumer's experiences, and the values that underlie their decision making processes, and how each of these develop and evolve. Digital content businesses need to seek strategies for empowering and engaging content users as stakeholders and community members. They need to embrace the "value-in-use" perspective on customer value and to work towards co-creation of customer experiences, and explore and implement strategies that support customers' value creation. In addition, revisiting the marketing challenges identified at the beginning of this section, business managers need to:

1 establish and maintain effective relationships with other stakeholders in value chains and work with these stakeholders to manage the channel at both the operational and user experience level
2 be aware of and support the learning demands that accessing digital content places on consumers.
3 develop pricing strategies that are sensitive to the way in which customers use and create value with digital content; pricing strategies need a customer value perspective, rather than a producer or marketplace perspective.
4 work on the challenges associated with branding in digital environments, since brands will be increasingly important for communicating messages and value in this marketplace.

Finally, there is a very evident need for further research in the area of digital content marketing. Some of this research needs to focus on specific sectors such as news, music and journal publishing, and the challenges facing specific groups of stakeholders in these sectors, whilst other research needs to contribute to understanding of the characteristics of digital content marketing that are shared by all or most types of content. As discussed above, the issue of "value" is pivotal, and is clearly an area that demands further research. Such research which, might ultimately inform not only digital content marketing, but also contribute to an enhanced understanding of the notion of customer value in the dynamic marketplace associated with an increasingly disposable consumer society, in which digital content is not the only commodity for which long term value has been converted into experience value.

Other areas for further research can be identified amongst the challenges of digital content marketing identified at the beginning of this section. These include:

- Value chain structures
- Pricing strategies ad models
- Marketing communications and branding
- Protection and licensing and digital rights management, and
- The customer experience of digital content.

Such research could be more effectively integrated into a body of knowledge through:

- The development of a taxonomy of digital content marketing. Such a taxonomy might differentiate digital content marketing on the basis of purpose of acquisition and benefits (entertainment, elucidation, education, enterprise), format of content (e.g. music, images, text, multi-media), and channel structure (e.g. B2Cm, B2B, C2C, G2C, B2B2C).

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