



Colin Hall

CMO, Allen Edmonds

CONTENT ENGAGEMENT AWARD

Q+A on Content Marketing with Colin Hall, CMO of Allen Edmonds

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Creating relevant content has quickly become one of the most effective ways to engage with an audience. But that's just part of the story since content marketing in isolation rarely moves the needle. Today's CMO needs to be able to understand how to pull all of the available marketing levers working to get the mix just right for his/her brand. Based on my conversation with Colin Hall, VP of Marketing at Allen Edmonds, few understand this better as he capitalizes on both the latest digital techniques and old school product catalogs to achieve double-digit sales growth.

In the interview below, Colin provides specific examples of how content is an integral part of Allen Edmonds' overall go to market strategy, starting with the need for a campaign idea, valuing quality over quantity and extending exposure via PR, social media and paid digital advertising. It's no wonder that Allen was rewarded with The CMO Club's Content Engagement award.

Drew: Can you describe your primary content marketing initiatives this year and how they benefited your company?

Colin: Our goal is to create relevant content to consumers through mediums they most often view. We start with marketing themes and then build integrated content to the channel. For example, a Rediscover America Sale around Columbus Day helps position our company's differentiated brand pillar of Made in America. We develop direct to consumer catalogs featuring made in American product and heritage stories of the company. We leverage social channels to feature our Wisconsin craftspeople to help prove we're an American manufacturer. DSP and dynamic retargeting banner ads are used for those who are most likely to purchase. Finally we develop films to show our Wisconsin area. Add some great PR and Blogger reviews, and all of these elements work together to drive awareness and sales. This year, our RDA sale

was up over 20% vs the previous year and represents our biggest selling period for the year.

One of our new content initiatives was to develop a partnership with America's top design school Parsons School of Design in New York City. This student design competition supported our made in America positioning and told the story of shoe making. The competition is fun for the students with a lot of social and PR following. It helps us reach young people and our craftspeople love to work with students. The winner receives scholarship aid from Allen Edmonds and the winning shoe was featured in our Rediscover America Sale.

Drew: Do you have any lessons learned on content marketing issues like quantity vs. quality, nurturing vs. lead acquisition, self-created vs. curated?

Colin: It all starts with great looking product and great photography. As a domestic manufacturer, our advantage is that we can continually tweak products until we're sure they're ready for the market. In other words, we're not beholden to foreign manufacturing schedules, international shipment timing and products arriving that are not to our quality standards.

We partner with three different photographers, each specializing in specific environments to ensure our products always look great. We create almost all of our content in-house which gives us strong control of our brand messaging. Then we measure everything so we can optimize content over time for continual improvement. About the only thing we don't fully control is PR by fashion editors and bloggers. But, we supply their closets with our seasonal best products and give them access to our photos and line sheets to help ensure their communication efforts are correct.

Drew: Your brand is heavily dependent on the retailers that

sell your product. How does this impact your marketing priorities? Do you focus on sell-in or sell-through?

Colin: We focus on both but place more emphasis on sell-through. Sell through means our wholesale customers are succeeding and our product is turning. Sell through success leads to more confidence in our brand and ultimately stronger sell-in. We support our wholesale accounts with various co-op materials including digital photos, in-store signage, catalogs, videos, in-store appearances by reps, trunk shows and Recrafting services just to name a few.

Drew: What marketing initiatives worked for you in 2014? Did you try anything new?

Colin: We initiated two new marketing efforts; an old school approach using big data and a new school approach.

- Our old school approach was to ramp up our paper catalogs leveraging co-operative big data for prospecting. We match back to our database and these efforts are driving sales of existing customers and new customer acquisition.
- Our new school efforts include Display Network advertising targeting new customers. We have enjoyed huge increases in sales through digital media including retargeting, affiliate, email and other channels but DSP allows us to serve ads to those who look like our primary customers but have never been to our site. We're seeing a \$5 revenue return for every \$1 we spend on DSP customer acquisition.

Drew: What's on your radar to try in 2015?

Colin: From a media standpoint, we're working on stronger segmentation of our customers which will lead to more strategic contact plans. It sounds basic but with all the various ways to reach customers it can be quite daunting. As the CMO, I straddle the desires of my retail and E-commerce teams to reach customers more frequently versus the brand's needs of maintaining a premium image. Hitting cus-

tomers over the head with more messages in more channels is a very slippery slope towards brand annoyance.

Drew: Marketing budgets are getting increasingly complex as new options and tools become available. How as CMO are you staying on top of budget allocation and optimization?

Colin: This is one of the biggest questions year in and year out. Our approach is to build on what is proven, optimize what we know should work and always test new efforts in small ways. If I had to put an allocation on it, I would say we allocate 70% on proven media, 20% on optimizing and 10% on testing new ideas. As a private equity owned company driving by EBITDA, we never bet the farm on anything unproven. We stair step our way through testing, optimizing and then investing in media.

Drew: Have you made in major changes to your budget allocation in the last year and if so, can you share what lead to those changes and how these changes have impacted results?

Colin: We're shifting more traditional media dollars to cataloging. We can measure the ROI of our catalog efforts with margin contribution per customer being the KPI.

Drew: What specific measures have you taken in the past year to build credibility with your CEO and board?

Colin: We have new owners and a new board as of last Thanksgiving when the company transitioned from one PE firm to another. Like any new owner, they have a lot of questions and their own ideas. Rather than bog down a board meeting with very detailed marketing questions, I began "Marketing Milestone" meetings separate of the board meetings. These are generally scheduled every other month and tied to our database refresh calendar. Board members are invited to attend (which they all do) along with internal leadership and younger PE employees who gain great business insight and experience from the meetings. We spend about 2 ½ hours going into details of learning from prior efforts, op-

timizing near term efforts and planning ahead. These meetings allow the board and others to ask a lot of questions, get a great understanding of what we're doing and why, and allows them to be involved. When we get to the board meetings we spend very little time on marketing as they're up to speed and feel the marketing team is on top of things. This allows the board to focus on other agenda items.

Drew: What advice would you give to fellow CMOs when it comes to building credibility with your CEO? Are there some things to be avoided?

Colin: I am lucky to have a great CEO. We have worked together for 6 years and completely trust each other. I over communicate with him to ensure he knows what's going on. Over time I have developed a great sense as to what he needs to know and when. I always prep him for any appearances and my communication style is fairly to the point. This means he doesn't have to search for answers... they are provided in a manner that's easy for him to digest.

Other than this award, I never seek the spot light. My CEO is the voice of the brand to our customers and I support him in front our leadership team and behind the scenes. While this approach may not garner me headlines in any marketing magazines or get noticed by executive recruiters, it really helps build trust. At the end of the day, we both do what's right for the brand.

About the author

Drew Neisser is the CEO and founder of Renegade, the NYC-based social media and marketing agency that helps inspired CMOs cut through. He is the champion of Marketing as Service, a philosophy he espouses in his writings on [FastCompany.com](https://www.fastcompany.com), PSFK, TheDrewBlog and The Cut, a much-appreciated monthly newsletter. If you have a CMO success story to tell, let Drew know at dneisser@renegade.com.

