

# The Fast-Growth Startup's Guide to Content



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Contently

Illustration by Hannah Waldron  
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**“In the beginning, we were publishing ten to twelve stories a day. However, we realized that wasn’t the best way to build the brand. We went down to three stories per day so we could really focus on driving quality.”**

—MICHAEL MCCUTCHEON, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, VAN WINKLE’S

# Introduction

When people learn I'm a freelance writer, they usually ask, "What are your dream publications?"

They're expecting the name of a prestigious newspaper or lifestyle magazine. But their expressions instantly change when I tell them, "Probably Slack, Airbnb, or Help Scout."

Don't get me wrong, I'd be thrilled to land a New Yorker byline. But the pieces that blow me away aren't just coming from the big names in media anymore—they're coming from startups. You can read about [wingsuiting](#) (the world's most dangerous sport) from Mr Porter. Or you can read about [Frank Lloyd Wright's legacy in Japan](#) via Houzz. Curious about the nitty-gritty realities of starting a business? Head on over to [Groove's blog](#).

If you think about it, this relationship between great content and younger companies makes a lot of sense. Startups face an elephantine challenge: They need to distinguish themselves in a crowded space while dealing with smaller budgets than industry incumbents.

Content marketing is [less expensive](#) and [more efficient](#) than splashy media campaigns, so startups that invest in publishing can squeeze out the most from their marketing spend. Plus, smaller companies are usually both willing and able to take creative risks—unlike large corporations, which face a tangled web of red tape, shareholder expectations, and compliance requirements.

Let's look at how three smart startups have used content marketing to accelerate their growth.

# I.

## Content Creation: Van Winkle's

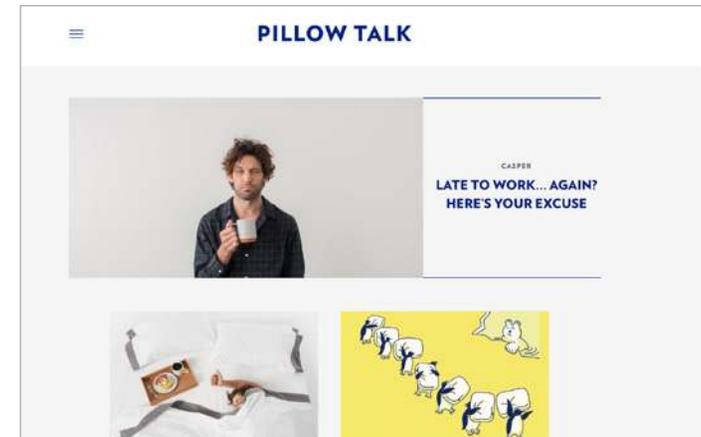
Startups are obsessed with scaling, and for good reason. What works for three people in a co-working space probably won't work for 50 people in a real office, and it definitely won't work for 150.

Scaling content is no exception. However, it definitely can be done—and done well, as New York-based mattress startup Casper has proven.

When Casper launched Van Winkle's, an online publication dedicated to sleep, it already had an active blog. Cheekily titled Pillow Talk, this blog has always published relatively light content, with recent posts including “[Every Day Is a Lazy Saturday When You're a Three-Toed Sloth](#)” and “[The Top 5 Coolest Places to Satisfy Your Cereal Cravings.](#)”

Van Winkle's is like Pillow Talk's older, more sophisticated sister, home for a couple days between getting her masters in psychology from Stanford and going to a medical conference in New York.

“Our goal for Van Winkle's was to create a media property that explored the science and curiosities of sleep and how it impacts our well-being,” said editor-in-chief Michael McCutcheon.



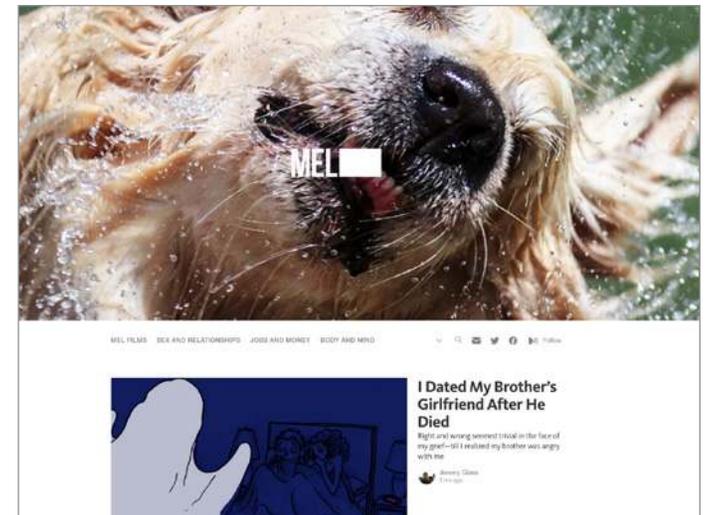
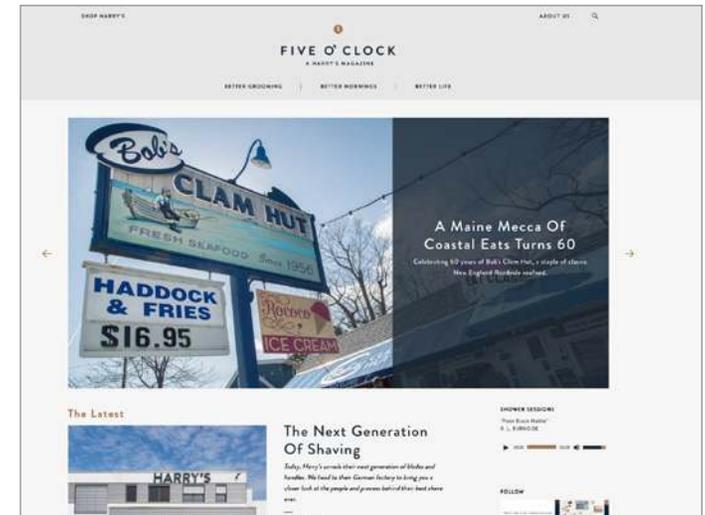
*The difference between Casper's two digital publications: Pillow Talk and Van Winkle's.*

To that end, the site publishes longform journalistic pieces usually grounded with scientific research and interviews. Although every article relates to sleep, Van Winkle's has shown a willingness to get creative, looking beyond typical science articles with stories like [“In the Dreams of Deaf People, Communication Is Often Achieved Through Telepathy.”](#)

One of McCutcheon's favorite pieces to date is [“Dating by Chronotype: Do Morning People Belong Together?”](#), which investigates whether those with different daily rhythms should shack up. The story is engaging and well-researched—and the word “mattress” isn't used once. In fact, readers probably have no idea they're reading a brand publication. Apart from some subtle attribution in the website's footer, Casper's logo and name are both absent from Van Winkle's.

This lack of branding is part of Casper's “larger goal [...] to make sleep a lifestyle category,” McCutcheon explained.

Other startups are following suit with their own brand publications. Harry's, a subscription razor company, launched [Five O'Clock](#), a lifestyle magazine with glossy photography and well-written articles.



*The lifestyle brand publications of subscription razor companies Harry's and Dollar Shave Club.*

Dollar Shave Club, also in the subscription razor space, runs a men's interest editorial operation called [MEL](#) and sends its customers an irreverent print magazine called [The Bathroom Minutes](#).

These publications give companies an opportunity to engage their customers in new ways—but, as McCutcheon warns, more content doesn't always mean more engagement.

“In the beginning, we were publishing ten to twelve stories a day,” he said. “However, we realized that wasn't the best way to build the brand. We went down to three stories per day so we could really focus on driving quality.”

Being more selective about what Van Winkle's publishes has paid off: Audience size has increased by 500 percent in the past three months.

In the near future, the editorial team will continue to focus on scaling engagement and readership. But their long-term plans are pretty ambitious.

“We're looking to build out a media company and potentially seek out advertisers,” McCutcheon said. “But we're in no rush to do so—the site's growing really well.”

The screenshot shows a webpage from Van Winkle's. At the top, there are navigation links for SCIENCE, HEALTH, CULTURE, PRODUCTS, and RESOURCES. The main article title is "In the Dreams of Deaf People, Communication Is Often Achieved Through Telepathy" by Adam Palmer, dated May 16, 2016 at 5:07pm. The article text discusses how certain members of the deaf community experience telepathy in their dreams. A quote from Gabriel Pacheco is featured: "I never actually see people signing or speaking." The article also includes a "MOST POPULAR" sidebar with various article thumbnails and a "NEXT" button.

*Van Winkle's goes beyond typical science articles with creative—but scientifically grounded—stories like this.*

## II.

# Best Practices: Distribution

Your content may be highly engaging, relevant, and memorable—but it won't affect your bottom line unless the audience knows it's coming from you.

Cloud-based software startup [BetterCloud](#) knows this problem firsthand. In BetterCloud's earliest days, the content team launched a blog. After some positive initial feedback, the company decided to expand its efforts with Gooru, an off-brand site with tips and tricks for Google apps.

Gooru was incredibly popular. The team started out producing tutorial videos each month, then ramped up to a weekly schedule, then finally a daily publishing cadence. Virtual events regularly drew around 25,000 attendees.

IT professionals and tech enthusiasts (BetterCloud's core demographic) were clearly hungry for this content, so the team grew more ambitious. In early 2015, they launched 365 Ninja, Gooru's companion site for Microsoft Office 365 users. Click-through rates for email newsletters soon topped 40 percent.

“By the end of 2015, we had more than one hundred thousand email subscribers across all three sites,” said Taylor Gould, BetterCloud's vice president of marketing. “That's really high for our market.”



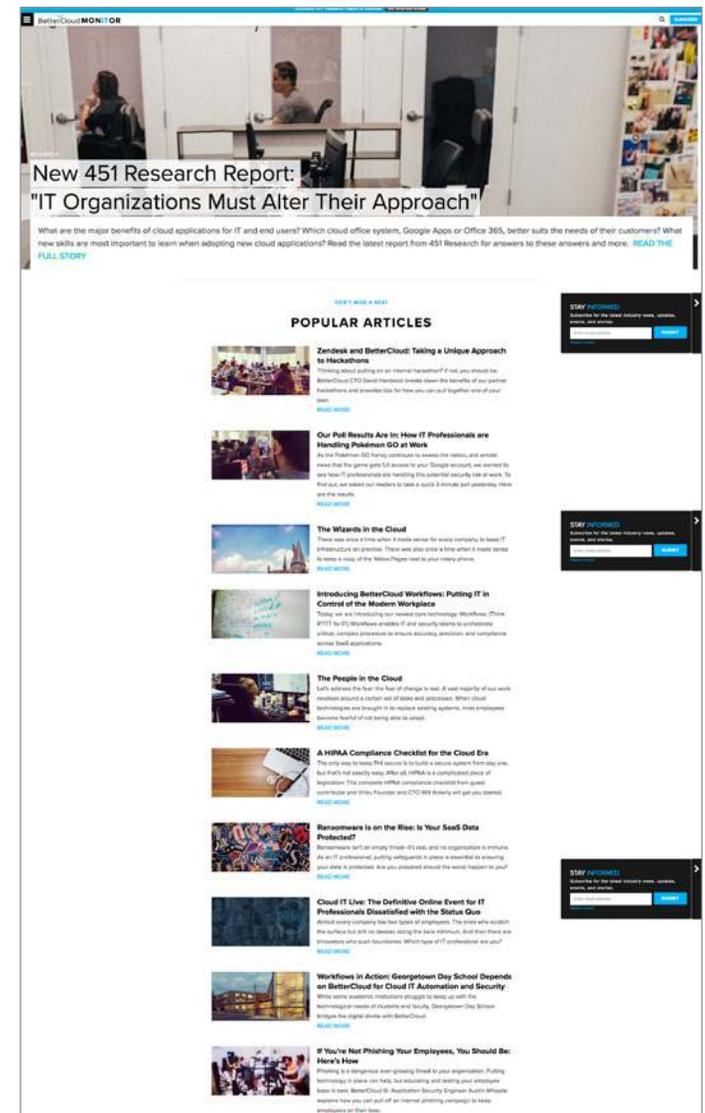
**By condensing everything into one place, BetterCloud actually moved against industry trends.”**

Yet behind the impressive stats was an issue. According to Gould, the majority of readers and subscribers were concentrated on Gooru and 365 Ninja, not BetterCloud. So in December 2015, the team made the decision to merge Google Gooru, 365 Ninja, and BetterCloud's company blog into [the BetterCloud Monitor](#), a branded publication hosted on the company's main site.

This wasn't a risk-free proposition. After all, most companies these days are doing the opposite—adding off-brand publications to their content roster and using channels like Facebook Instant Articles, LinkedIn Pulse, and Medium to publish original content as well as drive readers to their own sites.

By condensing everything into one place, BetterCloud actually moved against industry trends. Plus, as marketers know all too well, audiences can be mercurial. Some readers had been following Gooru and 365 Ninja since their inceptions—would they be turned off by the content marriage?

To gradually prepare subscribers, BetterCloud sent an email announcement several weeks in advance, then released a video in which Gooru and 365 Ninja writers “personally welcomed” their readers to the Monitor.



The homepage of BetterCloud's Monitor brand publication.

Since the shift, the number of marketing-qualified leads handed off to the sales team has increased by 30 percent.

“Far more people are being introduced to BetterCloud than before,” Gould said. “That goes toward our ultimate goal, which—beyond driving traffic, adding subscribers, and increasing engagement—is to generate opportunity value.”

To ensure that legacy readers didn’t feel overwhelmed by the Monitor’s broader range of topics, BetterCloud introduced a “dynamic” email newsletter. Every subscriber fills out a three-question survey about their interests, job role, and desired newsletter frequency. The BetterCloud team uses these answers to assign each person one of nine personas; every day, each persona gets a different version of the newsletter.

Ultimately, BetterCloud’s readers get the content they’re interested in—and BetterCloud gets the brand lift it desires.



**Our ultimate goal is to generate opportunity value.”**

— TAYLOR GOULD, VICE PRESIDENT OF MARKETING, BETTERCLOUD

## III.

# Best Practices: Measurement and Optimization

Publishing a piece of content is like releasing an animal into the wild. You can anticipate what will happen next, even try to influence it, but at a certain point, you need to just let go and track what happens.

What can content teams do with their data? That's tricky. Our [2016 survey](#) revealed that only 10 percent of marketers feel confident that their key metrics map to business results. That percentage may be even lower among startups, when you consider how quickly their objectives, market, and even products can change.

While many are going off into the wild without a clear plan, [Wistia](#), a video hosting and analytics platform, has done an impressive job of evolving its measurement and optimization strategy over time.

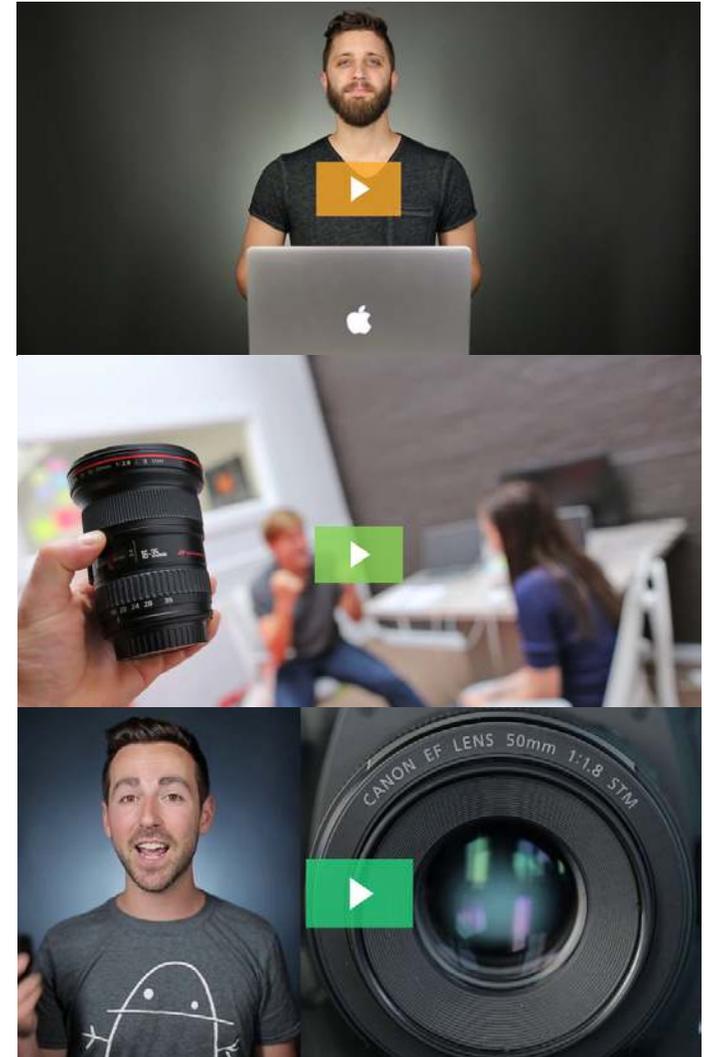
“We’ve actually just split our marketing team into two,” said Wistia content strategist Alyce Currier. “The awareness team is looking at number of visitors and pageviews, while the lead generation team is focused on email subscribers and new sign-ups. They’re more about getting people invested in the product.”

Wistia has also updated its definition of “success” for various content types. The team still uses traditional metrics to gauge how well the blog is doing, including pageviews, bounce rate, time on page, and conversions. “For videos, it’s a little more nuanced,” she said. “We look at percent viewed—but our target changes depending on the video type.”

For in-depth guides, such as “[How to Animate Your Company Logo](#),” the goal is to get people to watch the entire clip. But for less comprehensive videos “where someone might need a super-quick answer to one thing,” the team is okay with lower completion rates.

Keeping track of key numbers is a good start. However, to really kick your content strategy into gear, you should be acting on those stats. Wistia applies the data to create new content and also update existing pieces.

“We had a video called “[Get Creative with DSLR Lenses](#),” and we saw a huge engagement spike on one of the lenses, the Nifty 50,” Carrier said. “People were stopping and rewinding to get its name. So we made a [follow-up video](#) reviewing it.”

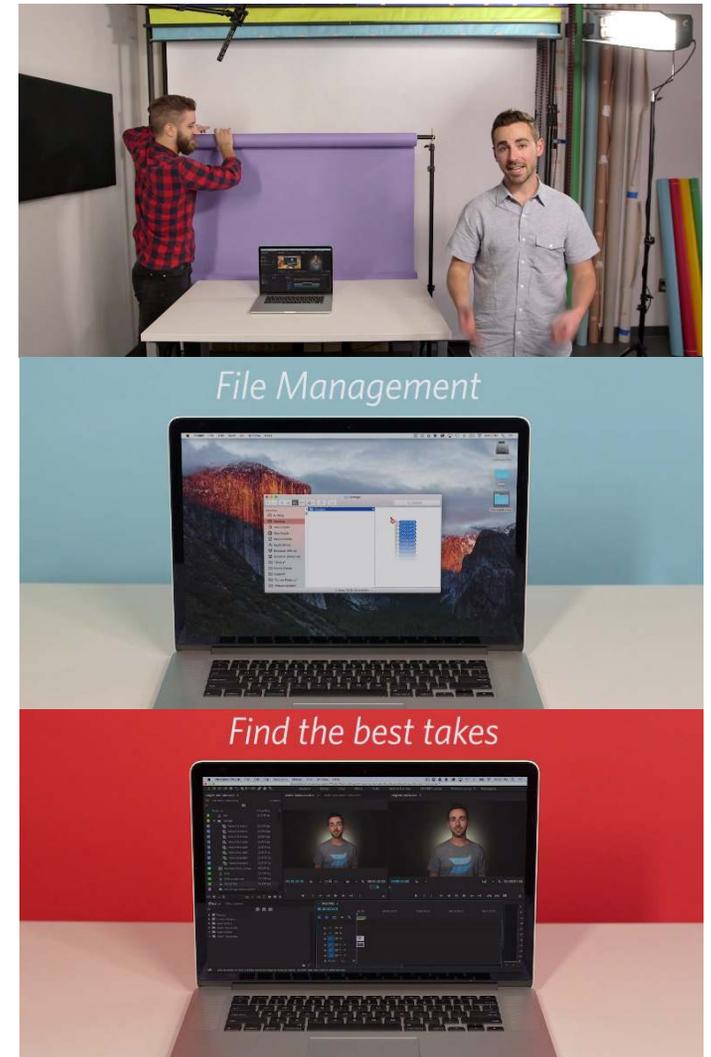


*Wistia uses different—sometimes nontraditional—metrics to gauge the success of its different types of videos.*

If Wistia's content team notices viewers are spending a lot of time on a specific portion of a video because of potential confusion or audio issues, they'll go back and edit it again.

Wistia has also been taking advantage of the behavioral data from its email subscribers. For example, the entire list got a link to Wistia's "[Editing Basics for Business Video](#)" guide. The 5,000 subscribers who clicked later received another email for an editing workshop video. Even though the follow-up video ran 30 minutes, people seemed hungry to get more information—the second email's average open rate was 64 percent, and the click rate nearly hit 26 percent.

As the company scales, its data strategy will transform yet again. Carrier said Wistia recently added a sales team, which means individual user data is becoming more important. "We can see what specific people were engaging with and pass that information along to the sales reps," she said. "It lets them have a more informed conversation."



*Wistia's video strategy is informed by behavioral data from its email subscribers.*

# IV.

## Emerging Trends

### SNAPCHAT

In just three months, Snapchat users went from watching a cumulative 8 billion videos per day to [10 billion](#). That's a massive jump, showing Snapchat's ability to provide sustained reach as a marketing platform for startups, whose need to create strong personal connections with consumers aligns with the lo-fi, unscripted feel of Snapchat's content.

The Snapchat strategy of Everlane, an e-commerce clothing brand, is a great example. In a typical Snapchat Story, followers might see sketches for a future design, clips from an office happy hour, or even a tour of one of the company's factories. The recurring "Transparency Tuesday" spot, in which Red Gaskell and Isadora Sales, two members of Everlane's social media team, answer questions from followers, is especially popular.

"It's a fun way for curious minds to get to know everything that goes on here," [Gaskell told Tech Insider](#).

Lyft, Uber's biggest competitor, was another early adopter of Snapchat. The [ride-sharing company joined Snapchat](#) in February 2015 and has used the app to share

behind-the-scenes footage, driver challenges, and random light-hearted content. The company managed to grab more eyes by temporarily “[taking over](#)” the account for ClassPass, a fitness startup.

Even companies that don’t necessarily seem like a natural fit for Snapchat are coming on board. Take DocuSign, a tech startup that lets people send and receive signatures electronically. [Snapchat fits into DocuSign’s larger advocate marketing strategy](#), helping the company nurture its relationships with existing customers by giving them virtual tours of its headquarters and taking them along to industry events.

There are still plenty of startups not on Snapchat, which means the novelty of interacting with brands on the app hasn’t yet worn off yet for consumers. As time goes on, audiences will likely become choosier about which companies to engage with on Snapchat, following the natural evolution of any platform.

## PODCASTS

The battle for consumer attention grows tougher every day. Yet from the fray an unlikely weapon has emerged: the podcast.

Not only has [podcast consumption surged 163 percent since 2006](#), but the format also boasts shockingly high engagement. On average, people listen to [22 minutes per podcast episode](#). And once they've subscribed to a podcast, they'll tune in to [almost 90 percent](#) of its episodes.

Startups are making their claim for these ears. In May 2015, Slack launched [Variety Pack](#), “a podcast about work, and the people and teams who do amazing work together.” Around the same time, customer communication platform Intercom created its own work-themed podcast, [Inside Intercom](#). HubSpot produces not one but two podcasts: [The Growth Show](#) and [UX & Growth](#). And perhaps the most well-known

(and meta) example is [StartUp](#), a podcast whose first season followed entrepreneur and radio journalist Alex Blumberg as he got his podcast company off the ground.

It's worth noting that the podcast-listening audience is a highly coveted one among marketers. Edison Research's [2016 podcast report](#) found that the typical listener is both tech-savvy and increasingly insulated from normal advertising.

“They are, thus, highly valuable targets for advertisers,” [explained Nicholas Quah](#) of the Nieman Journalism Lab. “Not only because their cable-cutting orientations signify a certain kind of high-value demographic, but also because they can't otherwise be reached through conventional advertising channels like television, broadcast radio, and so on.”

## INFLUENCER MARKETING

Unlike major corporations and well-known businesses, startups can't always rely on name recognition or massive media budgets to draw an audience. That's where influencer marketing comes in. By partnering with someone who already has credibility and an established fan base, a newer company can quickly increase the size of its own following and improve the perception of its brand.

This approach helped propel [Blue Apron](#), a meal delivery service, to a \$2 billion valuation in just three years. The company's collaborations with popular lifestyle bloggers like [Naomi Davis](#) and [Emily Henderson](#) typically show the women in their own kitchens cooking Blue Apron recipes for their friends or family. The original blog posts receive impressive engagement, and images reposted to Instagram can often score thousands of likes from the influencers' devoted fan bases.

Birchbox, a beauty startup, has also harnessed the power of well-known bloggers. Its partnership with Emily Schuman of [Cupcakes and Cashmere](#), who curated a box of Birchbox beauty products, received more than 18,000 Instagram likes and reached more than 550,000 consumers. Other bloggers are frequently invited to "own" Birchbox's Instagram account for a day, sharing behind-the-scenes posts of their lives.

B2C startups aren't the only ones embracing influencer marketing—many B2B organizations are tapping their industry's thought leaders as well. For example, [to promote its annual conference](#), the Content Marketing Institute collected insights from more than 200 established experts in the marketing industry, then used these quotes to create four e-books, each with its own complementary infographic and SlideShare. Unsurprisingly, the experts were eager to share these materials. The PDFs racked up thousands of downloads, generating more than 800 leads for the conference and 200-plus event referrals.

# Conclusion

For early-stage companies with big ambitions, content marketing can be an effective way to quickly transform from a relatively unknown brand to one that's trusted and recognized. In the olden days, an impressive legacy convinced consumers to buy your product. Now, high-quality content can guide their decisions.

“I think content is a really cool opportunity for companies to add value and make the internet a more helpful place,” Wistia's Currier said. “We get to use our powers for good.”

# Thank you.

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