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Hire the Right Journalist for your Marketing Team

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What Qualities Do They Have?

There are some key characteristics that make for a successful journalist-turned-content marketer. Obviously, being a skilled writer is of the utmost importance—but writing skills are just the beginning. Other important qualities to look for include:

→ **They're more realistic than idealistic.** Some journalists still believe that advertising, PR, marketing and editorial must exist in separate realms, says Dennis McCafferty, Content Director at [Welz & Weisel Communications](#). They see themselves as the guardians of truth, and believe that “real” reporting is about taking governments and

corporations to task. While this type of work has an honorable place, it isn't on your team. The journalists you hire must realize that in the world of content marketing, fields like advertising and editorial not only coexist, they are intricately intertwined. At the end of the day, they're joining a marketing team that has commercial interests and a mission of growing revenue.

→ **They can translate the language of business.** These journalists are able to translate the jargon and industry "buzzwords" of the corporate world into a language that anyone can understand. This can be evidenced through a candidate's past experience with business writing, or by their performance on writing tests administered during the hiring process (more on this later). They can explain in plain English exactly what the brand does, and are able to write compelling narratives about how its products solve problems for customers. Since these journalists bring a perspective from outside the business world, McCafferty says, their marketing content not only speaks to the corporate message, but to real people, too.

→ **They can produce content across a variety of publishing formats.** Content marketers may be responsible for producing a whole range of content types, such as social media posts, slideshows, white papers, blog posts, interactive web content and in-depth articles. Journalists you hire must not only have the technical proficiency to write in a variety of formats, they must understand the objectives behind each format type and be able to create content that aligns with them. For example, if they're writing a social media post intended to build online exposure for the brand, they must be able to communicate to the target audience in a manner similar to a PR person.

→ **They're relatively Web-savvy.** While you aren't looking for web developers, journalists should at least know how to navigate social media, be able to conduct effective Internet searches, have a basic familiarity with online publishing and understand fundamental principles of SEO. However, the leaders I spoke with agree that many of the necessary tech tactics can be taught, as long as some basic Internet-savviness is in place: the more inherent abilities of strong writing and storytelling should be prioritized.

→ **Strong interviewing skills and an ear for quotations.** Not all journalists are skilled interviewers: the ones you hire must be able to connect with sources in a friendly yet professional manner, and know how to ask questions that will elicit the desired responses. They also need to know a good quote when they hear it, says Joanne Cleaver, President of [Wilson-Taylor Associates](#), and should know when it's best to quote verbatim versus paraphrasing. Strong reporting skills can also come in handy when journalists are hired into a role requiring industry knowledge: even if they don't have it, they can find the right people and ask the right questions to get the information they need.

→ **An ability to quantify the story.** The journalists you hire must be skilled at finding numbers that help tell the brand's story and prove the value of its product to customers, McCafferty says, to lend credibility and support to the brand's claims. Journalists must be able to find patterns in facts and figures, point out the most relevant statistics and communicate to readers why they should care about them. And they must be able to weave these details into a story in a way that flows naturally.

→ **Time management skills that go beyond deadlines.**

Many journalists “let deadlines dictate their days,” Cleaver says, and fail to grasp the broader life cycle their pieces inhabit. Corporate projects often have milestones in-between the conception and publication of a project, which journalists may be unfamiliar with having to meet. For example, an infographic or Web page element may need to be created to accompany a story; or, if the project is for a corporate client, they may need to sign off on the project along the way.

How Do You Identify Them During the Hiring Process?

Once you’ve identified journalists with the skills and abilities you need, you must determine which of them are best suited for your content marketing team. Here are some approaches you can take during the hiring process:

→ **Put their skills to the test.** Give journalists a trial assignment, such as writing a short blog post or series of articles, so you can see their abilities in action. This not only demonstrates their writing skills, but their ability to research a topic and craft messaging in the appropriate voice and style. And it’s an opportunity to test their commitment: a surprising number of candidates we see at Software Advice fail to complete their tests altogether. Tests may or may not be paid, and may be conducted on- or off-site. Josh Braaten, Director of Inbound Marketing at [CollegisEducation.com](https://www.collegiseducation.com), describes how he collects a pool of writing tests from content marketing candidates, anonymizes them and has his content marketing team vote for their favorites—allowing the work to truly speak for itself.

→ **Ask for writing samples.** Past performance is important, and writing samples can showcase not only a candidate’s

best work, but their versatility. “Evaluate their ability to write for particular industries as well as for particular writing types—whether blog posts, newsletters, social media updates or white papers,” says Justin Belmont, Founder & Editor-in-Chief of [Prose Media LLC](#) (and former Global Editor-in-Chief at Google). He notes that, when evaluating writing samples, it’s important to put yourself in the mindset of the reader: would you still be reading this article if you’d found it online, or would you be off checking your Facebook notifications?

→ **Identify how much writing samples have been edited.**

It’s important to get a sense of how heavily-edited writing samples are, says Cleaver, in order to determine whether the candidate is really a great writer—or if they just had a really great editor. Ask candidates to identify which of their samples had the most and the least editing involvement; if the best piece was the most edited, that’s probably a bad sign. And if you’ve administered a writing test, you can compare the candidate’s work to the writing sample they claim was most untouched to verify that the work looks the same.

→ **Match the journalist’s background with your content marketing goals.** While the content marketing leaders I spoke with tend not to seek out journalists of a specific background, they agree feature writers have an advantage in that they are experienced with curating information and incorporating quotes and statistics to tell a story. Of course, you must also ask yourself what your business needs: if you need more in-depth content, such as e-books, white papers or in-depth articles, consider those with a background in long-form journalism. If it’s Tweets and short blog posts you’re after, a journalist with experience covering the daily

news beat or even sports and entertainment might be a better match.

→ **Hire for talent over experience.** While a journalist's background can make a difference, the experts I spoke with always hire for talent over experience—a [practice we follow](#) at Software Advice, too. "I don't care if they've been writing for six months or six years; if it's for The New York Times or a tech blog," McCafferty says. "I just want to see the work... I'd rather cast a wider net than a small one and see who shows up." Talent, to a large degree, can't be taught, but experience will come while they work for you.

→ **Look for professional experience beyond the newsroom.** Cleaver asks candidates about their participation in projects that required cross-departmental collaboration or had non-journalistic goals. Content marketers will frequently have to work with a range of departments both inside and outside the company, such as advertising, sales and the executive suite, so this type of collaborative experience is helpful. It also shows a professional flexibility and willingness to learn new things on the journalist's part—essential skills in the ever-changing landscape of content marketing.

Potential Red Flags

Just as there are some things you should look for during the recruiting process, there are some things you should look out for, as well. Potential red flags when hiring journalists as content marketers include:

→ **Lack of mastery of simple mechanics.** The journalists you hire must have absolute mastery of the basic mechanics

of writing and reporting. Their spelling, grammar and punctuation must be impeccable. They must also use engaging language, identify quality anecdotes and statistics that speak to the message and be able to weave those into the story seamlessly, says McCafferty. Even one or two of these types of errors on a candidate's sample or writing test is too many.

→ **A mismatch between the type of writing you need and the writing the candidate has provided.** This may indicate that the candidate would not be able to create content to meet client or brand specifications, whether due to a misunderstanding of instructions, a disregard for the rules or an inability to write in the voice or style required.

→ **Heavily-edited writing samples.** If the candidate has provided writing samples which are the byproduct of substantial editing, they probably don't have the raw writing talent necessary for success. While some editing will be required for even the best wordsmiths, their work shouldn't have to be fundamentally altered before it's ready for publication.

→ **An "old school" attitude.** Some journalists are stuck in the mindset of the past, and either don't understand or refuse to adopt things like social media and online publishing. Journalists need to be actively engaged online well before you hire them in order to succeed in content marketing roles, says Braaten.

→ **A long history of freelancing.** While this isn't necessarily a disqualifying factor, a journalist who has been working freelance for five or ten years in the setting of their choice can have difficulty adjusting to a nine-to-five position

in a busy office, says Belmont. During the interview, try to gauge candidates' preferred working environments and get a sense of their overall in-house history. You may also want to consider allowing former freelancers to work remotely, if that fits with your business model.

→ **A failure to meet deadlines.** You can identify candidates who are unable to meet deadlines by assigning take-home writing samples with a quick turnaround time. If they aren't able to complete stories in order to get the job, they certainly won't be able to meet deadlines after they're hired.

With newsroom cuts showing no sign of slowing down, the number of journalists entering the content marketing job pool are only likely to increase. By following these recommendations, you too can identify the best of them, find those who are the right fit and put them to work for your content marketing team.

The thumbnail image for this post was created by [NS Newsflash](#).