

Lori Thicke

Enterprise Innovators

Content strategy at Caterpillar



Founded at the beginning of the twentieth century to sell tractors, Caterpillar today is the world's leading manufacturer of construction and mining equipment, diesel and natural gas engines, industrial gas turbines and diesel-electric locomotives. Alan J. Porter oversees marketing content for Caterpillar's products, which last year generated \$65 billion in revenues. Originally from England, Porter is currently located in Peoria, Illinois, which is Caterpillar's home town.



Alan J. Porter, Caterpillar

Thicke: What is your title at Caterpillar? How long have you been in that role?

Porter: I joined Caterpillar full time in January 2013 as content marketing manager, with an initial remit to develop an enterprise-wide strategy for marketing content.

Thicke: What is your background? How did you come to be doing this work?

Porter: I've been in the content business for over 20 years now; I started in the technical documentation world, but within a few years ended up playing in the marketing world too, and have balanced the two ever since. At the end of the day it's all about the content creation, delivery and the value it delivers to the business and the customer, no matter what functional label it carries.

Thicke: You've written a book (available at Amazon) titled *The Content Pool: Leveraging Your Company's Largest Hidden Asset*. What inspired you to write it?

Porter: The book came from my 20-plus years of being in the content business. It started out as a collection of stories, concepts and ideas that I've developed over the years working with

a variety of companies, large and small, and noticing common trends and issues around content. Over the years I came to realize that content is a strategic asset and its development and management is as important as any other activity a company undertakes. To highlight that fact, the book puts forward the case for organizations to have a CCO, a Chief Content Officer.

Thicke: What's the most important message you wanted to transmit in your book?

Porter: Content is a huge asset to any company. It's where all the organization's intellectual property resides, and well conceived, developed and managed content can provide a distinct competitive advantage.

Thicke: What is a content strategy? Why would content even need a strategy?

Porter: If you do a search for the definition of content strategy you'll find many different versions. Every content strategist and consultant seems to have his or her own take on what exactly content strategy is. I'm no different, but I believe that all the other definitions can be boiled down into the one that I use. For me, content strategy is about achieving business goals by maximizing the impact of content.

The key to why content needs a strategy is that phrase *business goals*. All too often, content is produced without thought to the overall needs of the business as a whole. Content strategy is about moving content from a tactical department level activity to an enterprise level, where each piece of content helps drive the overall aims of the business.

Thicke: How does content give Caterpillar — already ranked as one of the top 100 global brands — a competitive edge?

Lori Thicke is cofounder and general manager of LexWorks, cofounder of Translators without Borders and a member of the Multilingual editorial board.

Porter: Great content that delivers value to your customers is vital in delivering on the promise inherent in a top brand. Top brands develop content that projects their brand promise in a consistent way, with a single editorial voice and message. Our aim is to provide content that is engaging, relevant to the customers' needs, actionable and above all delivers something of value that helps our customers succeed in their business.

Thicke: What's wrong with the way most companies manage their content?

Porter: When content is not viewed as a strategic enterprise asset it becomes very tactical, and the focus, where there is any, tends to be toward developing specific deliverables that are a reflection of a company's internal operational structure rather than the needs of the customer or the business. Content silos then quickly develop along operational or functional lines, which lead to inconsistency, duplicated effort, wasted resources and most importantly, a disjointed experience for the customer.

Thicke: How do your customers influence your content strategy?

Porter: Customers are key to developing an effective content strategy. At Caterpillar, we do a lot of research around both the voice of the customer and the voice of our dealers. Our content should be developed in the context of the customer's story and driven by what we need to provide to enable those dealers

and customers to meet their business objectives.

Thicke: How does localization fit into your content strategy?

Porter: With customers in 181 countries we need to think globally and deliver content locally; therefore, having a globalization strategy that aligns with the overall content strategy is key.

Thicke: How do you determine what content gets translated?

Porter: To my mind, translation is just one part of the overall content strategy, and like any good content, it should be driven by business needs.

Thicke: Is translation an activity that takes place only when the content is created, or should it be integrated into the process of content creation?

Porter: Translation should be considered as early as possible, at the content planning stage. It should be a consideration all the way through the content creation process and on throughout the content life cycle. When you know that a set of content is going to be — or most likely will be — translated, then I'd advocate training the content creators to write the source material using techniques that will enable better downstream translations.

Thicke: In an ideal world, what would be the role of translation in the content life cycle?

Porter: Ideally, translation needs and their impact should be considered at every stage of the content life cycle.

It's not just what languages you should translate into, it's also about how that content will be delivered in different markets, when translations are needed to tie in to product launches, go-to-market campaigns and so on, as well as considerations about keeping translated material in sync with the source as that changes, plus decisions around when translations may no longer be needed.

Thicke: How is developing a content strategy new, and how does it differ from the way marketing collateral was handled in the past?




Porter: I would say that many of the ideas and concepts behind content strategy are not necessarily new. I've been playing around with some of the concepts for over 20 years. What is new is the increasing realization that when content works across the enterprise it can add tremendous value to the business. This is where the change is happening. Marketing collateral is a prime example of the traditional approach of creating a specific set of content for one purpose within one area of the organization. Within an enterprise content strategy, the marketing becomes just one potential use of the content, and the marketing team has visibility to the value that other parts of the organization can add to their campaigns.

Thicke: How does technology help in the conception, creation and delivery of

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content to the customer?

Porter: Technology has allowed us to move the focus away from creating specific content deliverables, such as a printed brochure, to instead developing globalized intelligent content assets that are separate from the delivery format. These can then be stored in central content management systems, shared and accessed across the enterprise. Such assets are created once and then assembled and reused to create multiple different deliverables across multiple channels, allowing you to deliver just the content your customers need, at the time they need it, on the device they want and in their own language.

Thicke: You're not just a content strategist, but you're also a writer on pop culture. Can you tell us about that?

Porter: Sure. I write pop culture reference books on a variety of subjects, from The Beatles, to Batman and Bond, by way of Star Trek and more. I also write high-adventure fiction and comic books, where I'm probably best known as the writer of the Disney Pixar *Cars* comic book series that ran between the two *Cars* movies.

Thicke: How many books have you written?

Porter: There are about 11 books with my name on the cover and another ten where I've contributed to the content in one way or another from essays to short stories. Plus numerous magazine and online articles, reviews and so on over the years.

My current projects include *The James Bond Lexicon*, an encyclopedia of all things 007 in the movies, novels and comics; a Sherlock Holmes short story; and a new ongoing comic book series called *Forgotten City* that will debut later this year.

Thicke: How do you find the time?

Porter: Writers write. When something's a passion, you make the time. I try to write something every day by getting up a little earlier to write before I head to the office, and by having a very supportive and understanding wife who is happy for me to head into my home office on a fairly regular basis. Writing is not just about hands on the keyboard, it's about observing, getting experience, reading and a lot of thinking — writers are always writing! **M**