'The Very Latest, Modom': The British Commercial Gas Association and Content Marketing in Interwar Britain

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RESEARCH PURPOSE

The British Commercial Gas Association (BCGA), founded in 1912, was a co-operative commercial organisation established to promote and act as the publicity agent of the British gas industry (Scott, 2017, Chapter 8). The sector was highly fragmented into medium and large scale operations in both the public (through municipal association) and private sectors. In the interwar period the BCGA was both active and innovative in its promotion of gas to British households and a broad range of stakeholders. Much of this was due to the rise in household incomes, the development of gas appliances (cookers, heating, boilers, fridges, irons, etc.), and the emergence of electricity as an alternative source of household and commercial energy (Scott, 2017, Chapter 8). The latter, gas versus electricity, would erupt into a brand war which is still with us today.

During this period the BCGA emerged as one of the most innovative and pioneering actors in marketing and publicity in the United Kingdom. Alongside organisations such as the BBC, the General Post Office, Shell Transport and Trading, Imperial Airways, the Prudential Assurance Company, and the British railway industry, the BCGA was a pioneer in the development and application public relations (PR) in the UK (Heller, 2016a). It was also dynamic in its development, engagement with, and application of corporate social responsibility (CSR), both in relation to smoke abatement and housing.

A third pillar of the BCGA's marketing and publicity strategy was the development of content marketing which will form the main subject of this presentation. Content marketing is a topic which is unfamiliar to many business and indeed marketing and advertising historians (Rowley, 2008; Jefferson & Tanton, 2015). Yet it was one of the core marketing strategies of large-scale organisations in both the public and private sectors in the first half of the twentieth century in the United Kingdom and the United States (Pulizzi, 2012; Content Marketing Institute, 2015; Beard, Petrotta, & Dischner, 2021) which both buttressed and acted independently of advertising. Content marketing has been defined by the Content Marketing Institute (2021) as follows:

> *Content marketing is a strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly defined audience – and ultimately, to drive profitable customer action.*

In this context content refers to a wide range of communicative and promotional phenomenon that are produced by organisations and normally communicated and distributed across owned and earned rather than paid for media channels. It is the latter factor which predominantly differentiates content marketing from advertising. Content was and is normally divided into entertainment and educational varieties. Foregrounding and underscoring both are creativity, uniqueness and

relevance. Examples of content include publications, customer magazines, pedagogical material for use in schools and colleges, films, posters, music, art, reports, articles, events, games and toys, customer clubs, museums, buildings, and CSR. In the contemporary period, with the digitilisation of content marketing, this list can be expanded to include websites, social media, online games, digital TV channels, videos, and apps. Content marketing communicates and creates relationships with consumers and stakeholders, forges and discloses organizational identities, and creates powerful consumer and corporate brands.

Whilst the conceptualization, practice and institutionalization of content marketing is recent, the term originating in 1996 and the Content Marketing Institute being formed in 2011, its provenance is far older (Beard, Petrotta, & Dischner, 2021). What is unique and historically of great import is the acknowledgement and use by content marketing of its historicity (Content Marketing Institute, 2015). In contrast to other practices in marketing such as segmentation in the 1950s, positioning in the 1970s, integrated marketing communication in the 1980s and 1990s, and co-creation in the 2000s, which all emphasised their newness, content marketing uses history to frame itself. A core element of its narrative, which is used to both promote and legitimize its practice, is that content marketing can be observed as far back as the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg in the sixteenth century, became the dominant form of marketing by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was superseded by advertising with the mass commercialization of television in the 1950s, and reasserted its hegemony with the digitilisation of media in the 1990s and 2000s (Pulizzi, 2012; Content Marketing Institute, 2015). Rhetorical history grounds content marketing as an institutional and commercial practice (Suddaby, Foster & Trank, 2010).

This paper will focus on the use of content marketing by the BCGA in the interwar period. Its aim is to demonstrate how prevalent and creative content marketing was in this period. Based on historical research at the National Gas Archive in Warrington, Cheshire, the British Library, Kensington Central Library, and online sources the presentation will demonstrate how the BCGA implemented content marketing through customer magazines targeted at housewives such as 'The Flambeau' in the 1930s, trade publications, Gas Show Rooms, cookery books, educational content aimed at schools, documentary films, and CSR that focused on nutrition, smoke abatement, housing and education. In relation to the latter, it will case study the building in 1937 of the model dwellings and tenement block Kensal House in Ladbroke Grove, West London that provided sixty eight working class flats and housed three hundred and eighty people. The building was the first modernist block in the UK designed for working class families and contained a community centre, workshops, a nursery, a canteen, a laundry, and outside communal spaces. It was also powered and heated by gas and coke with a view to smoke abatement, and can be argued to be one of the first 'eco-houses' in the United Kingdom.

Through use of content marketing, the BCGA wove narratives of home, modernity, convenience, femininity, beauty, family, motherhood, health, and responsibility that created powerful symbolic associations with gas, marketed the new household appliances that the gas industry was developing in the interwar period, and developed a corporate brand that differentiated gas from electricity and forged relationships with consumers and stakeholders. Whilst on a microlevel the paper aims to provide a marketing history that demonstrates this process, on a broader macro level it aims to demonstrate the importance of content marketing as a historically central (but neglected) commercial practice by organisations in the private and public sectors in the UK, the emergence of CSR as a PR and commercial strategy at a far earlier date than has been assumed in the literature (Carroll, 1991), and the modernity (as opposed to decline) of British

industrial and commercial practices in the interwar period (Heller, 2016b; Maclean et al., 2020). It also aims to deepen our understanding of the use of symbolic and emotional appeals, as opposed to promotion based on functionality and price, that is increasing in traction and purchase in the marketing and branding historical literature (Schwarzkopf, 2009; Heller, 2016c). The presentation will end with a brief discussion of a dual publication strategy in both business history and mainstream contemporary marketing journals that can be evidenced by a historical study of content marketing.

DESIGN/METHOD

This paper has used historical research. This entails researching in archives and critically analysing sources to create credible accounts that are based on veracity, i.e. evidence from historical sources that can sustain narratives and historical arguments (Heller, 2023). The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur has argued that historical method passes through three stages: documentary, explanation/understanding and representation (2006). Historians visit archives and locate and analyse historical sources. Once these sources have been read, they are analysed and interpreted, and are then woven into historical narratives. Different methods are applied in each stage. Sources are not simply investigated for what they report, but also for how they can be trusted and applied.

This is referred to as source-criticism and is the foundational methodology of history (Heller, 2023). Historians also research at different archives and triangulate their sources to enhance their veracity. In relation to explanation/understanding, historians use a number of techniques such as contextual analysis to understand sources within their macro and micro environments, periodization and historical interpretivism where hermeneutical analysis is applied (Wadhwani and Decker, 2017). Finally, historians combine their sources and analysis to create convincing narratives. Here literary and rhetorical tropes are adopted to enhance the strength of historical accounts (White, 1973).

SOURCE MATERIAL/DATA

The paper conducted research at two archives: the National Gas Archive in Warrington and the British Library in London, which holds numerous historical sources on the gas industry. Creative content from the gas industry was also found on the internet. This article used mainly narrative sources such as company and associational magazines and gas content. Secondary literature was used to contextualise narrative sources. Content analysis was used to systematically analyse one of our narrative sources, the customer magazines, *The Flambeau*. Finally, the paper adopted an analytically structured history to narrate its historical account (Rowlinson, Hassard and Decker, 2014). In analytically structured histories narratives are created through concepts and theories rather than individuals or groups. The main characters of our history are not businessmen or companies, but marketing concepts such as content, platforms, integration, positioning, branding and marketing strategy.

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