

2B. Content Marketing: Brand Journalism at BOK Financial

Situational Analysis: In mid-2019, the new corporate communications team at BOK Financial (BOKF) pitched marketing leadership and company executives on adopting a brand journalism approach and developing an owned media platform to build the company brand. While they were not familiar with the “brand journalism” term, the idea of thought leadership resonated, but it would take a significant shift for the entire organization, which had traditionally been focused on product marketing with very little focus or budget for paid or earned media.

The internal pitch was that our clients and prospects—both individuals and businesses—are becoming increasingly averse to “marketing content” and traditional advertisements. The comms team set out to convince leaders that we had an opportunity to support BOKF’s marketing and reputation-building efforts through a broad approach to thought leadership by adding frequently updated, shareable content online with content to highlight employee expertise, industry leadership, employer brand and community engagement. In addition to building an entirely new platform to host owned media that was accessible to the public, the content could be pitched to media. With shrinking newsrooms and the push for individuals to do more, journalists are interested in developed stories—or at least story angles—to provide valuable information to their audiences. Media coverage of these topics and our experts would also build the BOK Financial brand and reputation.

Research

Research to launch this program was comprehensive. First, we conducted a content audit to evaluate existing content on the company websites to discover that 85% of it was purchased from third-party content providers and had not been updated in more than three years on the site. Then, we spent time with web analytics understanding which pages and types of content were getting traffic and what visitors were searching for. This evaluation process allowed us to identify areas of opportunity, topics of interest to website visitors and what traffic was being generated by social media (only 19,697 total clicks in 2019, with a measly average of 25 clicks per month from LinkedIn).

As a result of the fact that our company was producing little owned content, analytics research also revealed that our social media channels were directing little traffic to our sites. We identified a significant opportunity to carve out a space for owned media around our brands.

Once ready to move forward, we spent time reviewing more than 25 brand journalism sites, newsletters and social channels from companies in a wide variety of industries to identify best practices.

Once we identified the basic structure of our site, we worked with our UX team to conduct consumer research to determine how potential readers would categorize our content. 109 participants were asked to categorize 57 topics (existing and future content angles), which then informed our decision-making process on the four main categories of our site.

Planning

Audiences: The audiences for the brand journalism program were broad including existing clients, prospects, community partners, employees and media (all slightly nuanced for distribution channels).

Here is what we set out to do at the beginning of 2020, which all got pushed back by other priorities to serve clients during the pandemic. However, these goals transitioned over to 2021 as a guiding point.

1. Establish BOKF news desk, editorial processes and guidelines by March 15, 2020.
2. Produce at least two articles a week beginning February 2020 and launch site with 50+ articles.

3. Partner with IT and Digital teams to create an online platform to host original content from across the company by Q1 2021 that fit within brand standards.
4. Deliver monthly average of 1,250+ clickthroughs to BOKF websites from social media by end of 2020.
5. Partner with marketing to generate 3,000 visits per month to brand journalism site by year-end 2021.
6. Develop subscription email to showcase top articles and track site metrics by Q1 2021 and generate 2,500 subscribers by Q2 2021.

Implementation

In late 2019, BOKF Corporate Communications worked with Ragan Consulting Group to refine our business case for brand journalism. We used that research-informed business case to educate executive leadership, marketing managers and regional representatives and create buy-in for the concept. It was a massive shift for the organization to invest in a program around owned content.

We had grand plans going into 2020 with the web design and IT teams moving forward on the site design early in the year, but all was put on hold when the pandemic hit and teams were shifted to high-priority projects in response. While our website development was stalled, we knew the articles would be valuable to our audiences so we found a workaround to get the information published far in advance of the site.

In fact, the actual site ended up taking an entire year longer than expected launching in March 2021. In the meantime, we published more than 100 pieces of content on our brand sites in 2020 and shared every story through brand social channels. Beginning in March 2020, the Corporate Communications team became the “news desk” with support from a freelance writer. Weekly news meetings identified appropriate internal experts and kept newsworthy, timely content on track. Fast forward to March 2021 and [The Statement](#) was born.

Evaluation

We are still early on the brand journalism journey, but can evaluate success in a few ways:

- Surpassed publishing goal with 100+ articles at launch and currently publish two to three articles per week. The site now has 300+ articles and a team of nine contributing writers.
- After making the switch to producing owned content, we grew LinkedIn followers by 6,083 across the company’s four brand channels from Jan. to Dec. 2020—a 19% increase, and the followers continue to grow reflecting a 31% increase in the past two years. The transition to sharing expertise, educating readers and posting valuable content rather than pushing products was very well received. LinkedIn generated 40,193 clicks to owned content in 2020 (significantly more than the annual goal).
- Leadership and employees are delighted with the content sharing comments like “We’ve been asking for this for years!” and “This is exactly how we can distinguish ourselves from other financial institutions.”
- Brand journalism efforts are connected to media relations. Some of our owned content is pitched to local, regional and national media. They are invited to run the story as is or take it as a basis for developing their own version incorporating local BOKF experts. We have had landed several pieces of media coverage as direct result of brand journalism efforts (*see examples in Execution & Evaluation addendum*).
- In addition to The Statement site, the content team has generated multiple robust content hubs (i.e. [Navigating the New Normal](#) and [Labor Pains](#)) to promote our thought leadership. We also led efforts to transform a previous quarterly PowerPoint/email update for Investment Management into an [online interactive format](#).
- Our web team adopted Google Analytics in June 2021 after identifying that former systems were flawed. In the first six months of using Google Analytics, we have exceeded the goal of 3,000 visits per month, as we already have 4,600+ pageviews per month for a total of 87,867 from June to December 2021.
- While we have not met our goal of newsletter subscribers yet, the newsletter has been launched and new subscriptions come in daily.