The Mequoda 500 Research Methodology

Strategies and Findings for the Mequoda 500 – a Look at the Top 500 Open Content Websites in the US

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Introduction

Open content has been around since the inception of the web. Since that time, it's been debated if top branded content suppliers should be using an open content model to drive online business, in particular, website traffic.

To supply the industry with pertinent data, the Mequoda Research Team conducted the 2011 Mequoda 500 study. This study determined the content and business models for the top 1,000 websites according to traffic numbers from Compete.com and focused on the top 500 that operated an open content model.

One primary goal of the study was to see what percentage of websites use only one content model and how many use more than one.

In mid-2009, we observed these stats through casual observation and theorized that roughly 22% of the top websites were using an open content model.

Today, publishers should take note that out of the top 1,000 websites on the Internet, nearly 58% are using an open content model.

The websites that qualified for the Mequoda 500 varied greatly in their use of open content. Some had 100% free content without registration or payment; others had only portions of their content free and openly available, which accounts for a significant amount of website traffic.

Many websites incorporated a blog, updated daily or weekly, into their website strategy, which was good enough to qualify as a significant traffic-driver.

It's interesting to see that in this study, there were 575 websites out of 1,000 that utilize an open content model. Even more interesting was seeing that 41% of the total websites analyzed were Google-friendly. Keep in mind this isn't 41% of the 580 websites; this is a cross-statistic based off the entire 1,000 sites. Search is something a high percentage of websites are paying attention to.

This report discusses the findings from the Mequoda 500, the methodology used in our research, a look at the Mequoda Open Content Standards and how online publishers should use our findings to better their online businesses going forward.

Methodology

In order to determine the top 500 websites on the Internet operating an open content model, we consulted Compete.com and took a critical look at each of the top 1,000 websites.

While doing so, we broke the content models into five types: open content, closed content, retail content, user-generated content and search engine content. Here is an overall snapshot that shows the content model usage for the Mequoda 500:
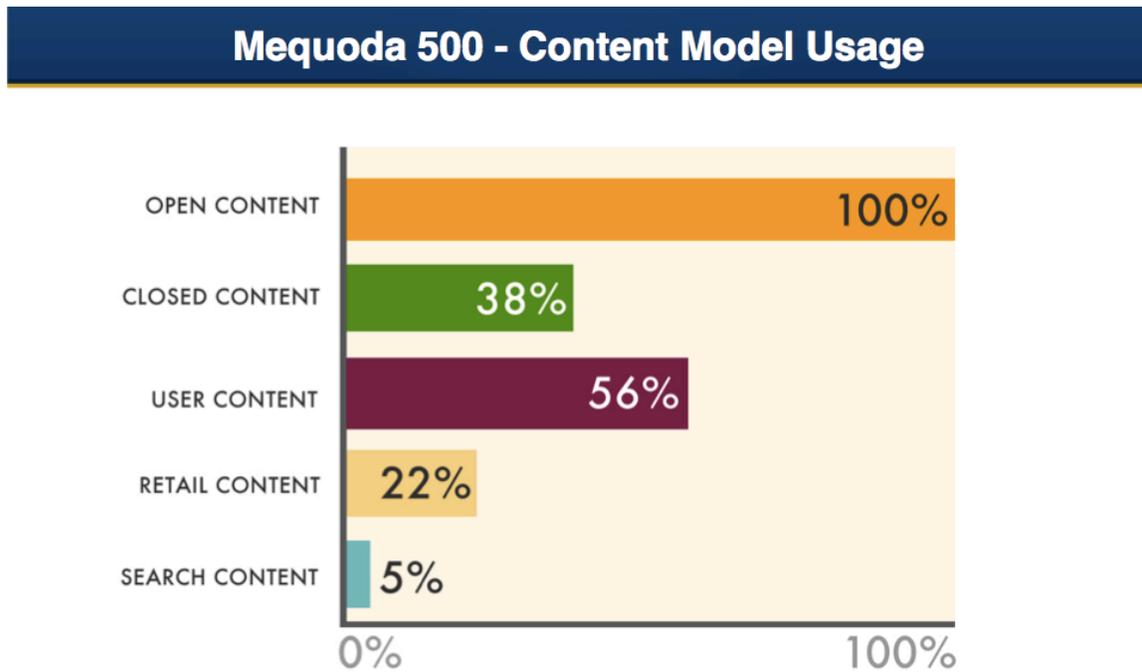
The following chapter defines the content models we used to categorized each website within the Mequoda 500.

Five Content Model Attributes

Open Content

Any website that provides content to users for free is using the open content model. Sites that qualify generally have free blogs, open portals, news headlines, articles or videos. This includes evergreen reference content as well as news-worthy periodical content.

A criterion of open content websites includes providing content to users for free. This may involve reference content or regularly published content, which is managed in a professional way. The new content needs to be published daily or close to daily to show audience members that it is serious about holding market share.

An example of an open content website is About.com which publishes thousands of reference articles every day by hundreds of different editors.

Closed Content

Websites utilizing closed content always require users to login or register to view some amount of content.

Some websites with closed content give a small amount of content away for free, but require registration to view the bulk of the content.

Although closed content websites require registration, they don't necessarily require payment, which means they may be free or premium (paid) websites.

Some websites also limit the interaction of the user. Websites that require a registration and login to publish comments, content or facilitate a transaction are also considered closed content sites.

Shutterfly.com is an example of a closed content website because even though their membership is free, they still require you to log in for access to the features of their service.

Retail Content

A website that utilizes retail content is one that sells products or services. The transaction can be performed directly online or directly offline and must terminate with the publisher. For example, Honda.com is considered a retail site even though the purchase is happening offline on physical car lots.

The main point of a retail website is to facilitate direct transactions. This should not be confused with publishers that sell links or impressions, which are considered sponsor-generated websites.

User-Generated Content

Websites with user-generated content allow users to interact on the website by commenting, reviewing, rating, posting or taking part in discussions.

A social network always incorporates user-generated content; therefore any social network business model incorporates user-generated content.

Squidoo.com is an example of a website utilizing user-generated content because every page on this resource website is created by a user.

Search Engine Content

Websites that have a primary function of performing a search are providing what we refer to as search engine content. The site must be indexing and displaying content from multiple sites across the web to qualify as having search engine content.

Google.com may be the most recognizable search engine because it takes relevant content from many different sources throughout the Internet.


It's important to realize that retailers are not search engines, unless they are aggregating and indexing content from other websites. Search engines are used to provide valuable content to seekers, and all sites utilizing a true search engine content model needs to abide by this concept.

Mequoda Open Content Standards

We went a step further and scored the top sites on the four Mequoda Open Content Standards of being Content-Driven, Google-friendly, Subscriber-centric and Multiplatform. Unsurprisingly, marketers are acknowledging that it's important to build relationships with website visitors.

Supplying updates, specials and news about your brand, whether this is through email, social media or RSS, is proven increasingly prominent as 96% of websites are focused on building relationships with their visitors.

Mequoda 500 - Mequoda Attribute Compliance

CONTENT DRIVEN	100%
SUBSCRIBER CENTRIC	96%
GOOGLE FRIENDLY	59%
MULTIPLATFORM	30%

0%   100%
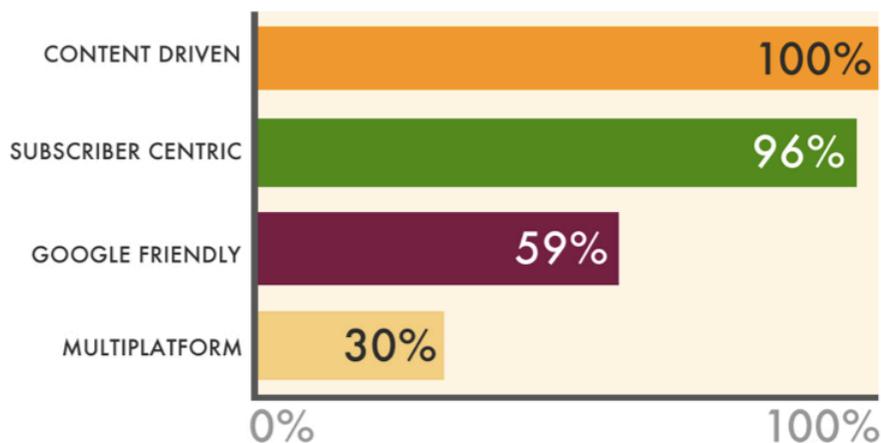
Out of the top 1,000 websites, 22% complied completely with the four Mequoda Open Content Standards. Here is a description of each:

Content-driven
Websites that are content-driven are committed to publishing news and information on a regular frequency to build reader trust and brand authority. Since high-quality information is the main focus of content-driven websites, they typically offer a lot of free content and are often advertisement-driven.

CNN.com is an example of a content-driven website because it maintains a continuous stream of new content every day

Google-Friendly

In order to be considered Google-friendly, three headlines for open or closed content websites have to appear within the first three pages of a Google search. For retailers, the product name or description has to appear.

Is your website Google-Friendly? Try searching your headlines in Google and see if they show up on pages one, two, or three in Google. If not, your website is not Google-Friendly and you are likely missing out on a much larger audience of people using the most popular search engine.

Subscriber-Centric

To be considered subscriber-centric, a website must place a strong value on building relationships with visitors. A website is considered a subscriber-centric website if they provide an opportunity above the fold to sign up for an email newsletter, subscribe to an RSS feed, or interact on a social network like Twitter, Facebook or LinkedIn.

The key point to being subscriber-centric is an aggressive stance on promoting its engaging and interactive nature. The ability to share, tweet, like or comment has to be present above the fold and throughout the vast majority of a website to be considered truly subscriber-centric.

Note: Google has Twitter and Facebook but didn't get credit for being subscriber-centric because they weren't aggressively promoting it on their homepage.

Multiplatform

For an online business to be multiplatform, it must have some sort of physical component. For instance, if an organization produces offline products (PDF, apps, books, magazines, DVDs, radio and TV appearances) or in-person events (events,

seminars, shows, public speaking events, mingle with experts face-to-face) then they can be considered as multiplatform.

A major key to the in-person characteristic of being multiplatform relies on branding. For instance, *Men's Health Urbanathalon* qualifies as a multiplatform component because it's a branded event. However, regular appearances on TV or radio would not count unless there is a specific branded identity involved. If not, it is no more than a PR strategy.
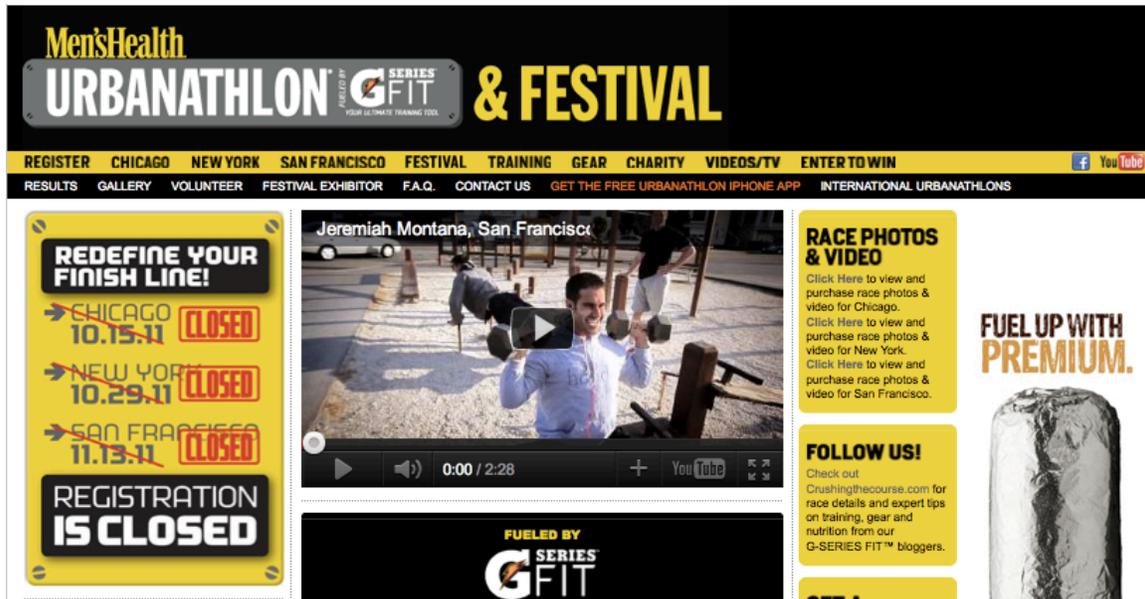
Amazon is an interesting company to look at for the multiplatform component. We have considered them multiplatform because they have Kindle. It's important to note that they didn't get qualified as multiplatform because they sell physical products offline—those products are not branded. If they didn'tt have Kindle, they would not have been considered multiplatform.

Interesting Fact: Google was the largest website for the criteria of open content, closed content, user-generated content and search engine content. Yahoo followed closely behind, and fit the criteria for all five content models including retail.

Suggestions for Online Publishers

We suggest that most online businesses should run all four types of content models, with the search engine model being an option only for specific companies pulling in a lot of outside content from around the web.

Utilizing the four content models (Content-driven, Subscriber-centric, Google-friendly and Multiplatform) will give you the best chance of getting your content found in search engines while delivering content in multiple places and forms to entice the largest possible audience.

Content Model Data Set Comparison

	Compete 1000	Mequoda 500
Open Content	57%	100%
Closed Content	31%	38%
User Content	45%	56%
Retail Content	37%	22%
Search Content	10%	5%

Mequoda Attribute Compliance Data Set Comparison

	Compete 1000	Mequoda 500
Content Driven	58%	100%
Subscriber Centric	93%	96%
Google Friendly	42%	59%
Multiplatform	33%	30%

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Conclusion

This study has shown the popularity of open-content websites. The majority of Mequoda 500 and Compete 1,000 websites utilize an open-content model.

Our results have also shown how the Mequoda Content Standards are being utilized by top websites. It breaks down as follows:

- For the top 1,000 websites on the Internet, 22% are utilizing all of the Mequoda Content Standards.

- 100% of the Mequoda 500 are open-content websites.

- 96% of the Mequoda 500 are subscriber-centric.

- 58% of the Mequoda 500 are Google-friendly.

- 30% of the Mequoda 500 are multi-platform.

Our Mequoda Content Standards are designed to help publishers create content that can be found and shared organically. They are also designed to interest audience members enough that they engage with the brand in a more comprehensive manner.

Furthermore, this study proves that the bulk of websites use more than one content model, which affords them the best chance of building a diversified audience. This audience consists of different types of individuals – subscribers and consumers – which are important parts to a sustainable online business.

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