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## Custom Content Creation as a Cure-All

By Matt Alderton

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*Content reigns, but for how long? For Royal Caribbean content isn't just a buzzword; it's a business driver.*

Something stinks in the cruise industry. Literally, thanks to Carnival Cruise Lines' notorious "poop cruise," which in February 2013 left 4,200 passengers stranded aboard the Carnival Triumph for five days in the Gulf of Mexico without power, heating, air-conditioning or working toilets. Compounded by several incidents before and since—including the [Costa Concordia](#) disaster in January 2012, when the Carnival-owned ship ran aground in Italy, killing 32 people—the sweat and stench stuck, as viscous as they were noxious.

The resulting flies swarmed the entire cruise industry. According to the inaugural "Cruise Line Satisfaction Report" from J.D. Power in 2013, the No. 1 reason passengers choose one cruise line over another is price. That meant the industry had a problem: How to distance itself from the bad press circling Carnival.

Carnival's chief competitor, Royal Caribbean International, had to find a way to differentiate itself in an industry that lacks differentiation.

"Consumers don't necessarily associate a particular brand with the category," says [Lisa Bauer](#), who left Royal Caribbean in September after serving as executive vice president of global sales and marketing. "So, the question for us was: How do you help a brand break through a 'cruise industry issue' and stand on its own?"

## The solution? Content.

"Content is a central part of our strategy," explains Bauer, who says custom content stimulates business in the form of referrals because it's trustworthy, engaging and shareable. "Referrals from friends and family are the No. 1 influencer when it comes to travel. That's what people trust the most."

## Harnessing Word of Mouth

Because it can be distributed far, wide and for free from happy passengers to curious prospects, content marketing allows Royal Caribbean to distinguish its brand by harnessing customers' enthusiasm.

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Case in point: The "Royal WOW" campaign, a 2013 yearlong celebration of the company's milestone of 50 million guests. The campaign starts offline with special events aboard Royal Caribbean ships, then continues online, where passengers post their favorite "WOW" moments—including photos, videos and stories—to social networks using the hashtag #RoyalWOW. Moments posted on Facebook and Twitter are aggregated on a special web page: [www.royalcaribbean.com/wowometer](http://www.royalcaribbean.com/wowometer).

According to Bauer, the effort has been a huge success. In fact, as of October 2013, consumers had shared more than 53 million #RoyalWOW moments online.

"People are really passionate about telling their story. We wanted to find a way to let them tell that story so that other potential cruisers could see it," Bauer says. "It's a really good example of bringing our brand to life with storytelling."

## Building Excitement with Video Content

In the wake of Triumph, one of Royal Caribbean's major priorities was getting consumers excited about its newest ship—Quantum of the Seas. There was just one problem: It wasn't built yet. No ship means no guests, and no guests means no guest-generated content. Instead, Royal Caribbean had to create its own video content for consumers to share, which it did in a short film "Experience Quantum of the Seas."

"Our chairman, Adam Goldstein, laid down a challenge. He said, 'I want to see the best video that's ever been done in the cruise industry,'" Bauer says. "So, our marketing team went to [Royal Caribbean's digital marketing agency] Mindshare Entertainment and said, 'We have to put together something that's as cool as the ship itself. And oh, by the way, the ship doesn't exist yet.'"

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The result is an 8-minute, 10-second video featuring Quantum's "godmother," Emmy-nominated actress Kristin Chenoweth. Traditionally, a ship's godmother christens and names it at its launch. Deploying her as an ambassador to preview the ship before its construction was an unusual move.

Equally unusual was the technology used to produce the video, which leveraged green screens and 3-D animation—the same technology used to film the movie *Avatar*—to digitally re-create the entire ship based on its CAD drawings, all the way down to its light fixtures. In the video, Chenoweth and a handful of celebrity guest stars traipse around a virtual ship, using cutting-edge technology to showcase Quantum's cutting-edge amenities.

The video content is cool. More importantly, though, it's effective: Within six months of its April 2013 debut, the video had garnered more than 300,000 YouTube views. Although Quantum doesn't sail until November 2014, those views already have helped generate bookings—in spite of the negative press plaguing the cruise industry at large.

"Our revenue management team set a target for bookings by year-end 2013. We'd already exceeded that number at the end of June," says Bauer. The whole process taught her that positive content can be just as powerful as negative press. "Commercially speaking, we hit it out of the park because we put content out there that truly reflects our brand."

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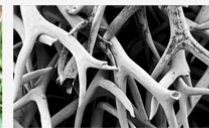
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