This year’s Digiday Content Marketing Awards honor a wide variety of brands, agencies and studios. Honorees tackled countless social channels and content formats, ranging from live streaming to documentaries to experiential activations and even graphic novels.

Successful content marketing has always found itself inextricably connected to the ideals and concerns of audiences. And the stellar efforts of this year’s awardees make one thing clear: In today’s era, those ideals revolve around social consciousness, and are rooted in a desire for a brighter future. A vital trend: winners seized on urgent subjects ranging from climate change to justice and equality. The 2020 Digiday Content Marketing Awards winners envisioned what that future could be, and showed it to us.

Use this guide to explore all the winners of the 2020 Content Marketing Awards. In each section you’ll find a quick rundown of the campaigns, along with insights into why they won and what we can learn from them. Put these ideas to work, and we hope to see your campaigns among the honorees in future Content Marketing Awards.
The year’s best campaigns mastered several approaches to successful content marketing. First: If you have a great product, don’t pitch it — showcase it. On a deeper level, these campaigns also shared common threads. Specific resonance with an audience — whether personal or cultural — drove engagement for these winners. Authenticity and expertise, often encountered together, proved powerful tools for the campaigns. And, if an advertiser’s audience has a great story to tell, campaigns thrive when they provide a place for UGC to tell that story.
Best Experiential Marketing Campaign
United Entertainment Group and Edelman

The Bell: A Taco Bell Hotel and Resort

In August 2019, Taco Bell decided to try its hand at something new: hotel management. And while the average time spent at a Taco Bell drive-through amounts to roughly three minutes, the company’s new Palm Springs resort took things to a new level, selling out all its reservations in only two. Fans were served poolside menu items and exclusive recipes that then debuted at The Bell.

Insights

Taco Bell delivered a master class in experiential marketing, driving more than 4.4 billion impressions, more than 5,000 media stories and creating the biggest sales quarter in the company’s history. Driving independent media coverage can be worth a whole lot more than traditional paid marketing.
Best New Product or Launch Campaign
Samsung Canada

#PowerUp

At launch, Samsung targeted the new Galaxy Note10+ device toward a premium market of content creators with the goal of better helping them tell their stories. Across four episodes of a new video series, filmmaker Director X coached three up-and-coming music video directors on how to shoot and edit professional quality video on a Note 10+.

Insights
The #PowerUp campaign is a classic example of show don’t tell. Samsung demonstrated just what the company’s new device was capable of. If you’ve got a great product, stand back and let it speak for itself.
Most Effective/Measurable Campaign
Day One Agency and Chipotle Mexican Grill

Chipotle Rewards Program
In the spring of 2019, Chipotle launched its first loyalty program — and then swore off paid advertising altogether. In a first-of-its-kind partnership with Venmo, the brand paid its fans instead. By visiting ChipotleRewardsMe.com, fans could sign up for Chipotle’s new loyalty program and also sign up for a chance to win as much as $500, which Venmo deposited into their accounts as their friends looked on with envy. The campaign drove more than 1 million enrollments in its first week.

Insights
By partnering with the most socially connected payment app in existence, Chipotle turned a loyalty program into a powerful case of FOMO. It’s good to reward your fans — and real rewards draw new fans into the fold.
A new podcast hosted by acclaimed journalist and historian Walter Isaacson covered the history of industries, technologies and crucial cultural moments — from the advent of batteries to the downfall of Blockbuster, to the rise of dating apps.

With its authoritative podcast, Dell turned to a respected historian to showcase its technological expertise. Nothing says thought leadership like an encyclopedic knowledge of your industry’s history.
Best Branded Content Series | B2C
Viacom Velocity and Procter & Gamble (Aussie)

Aussie: She’s the B’Auss

P&G’s haircare brand Aussie partnered with Viacom Velocity to bring the brand to the forefront of Gen Z life while driving consideration and purchase of the 3 Minute Miracle Moist product line. The campaign hinged on ‘She’s the B’Auss,’ a three-episode YouTube series featuring advice on relatable topics like starting a new career and dealing with bullies. The series drove five million views and 17 million impressions.

Insights

With an all female crew and subject matter that heavily resonated with a young female audience, Viacom Velocity and P&G proved that you can reach the haircare-obsessed without just talking about hair care. Striking an authentic chord with your audience often beats trumpeting your product’s virtues.
Best Interactive Content Piece or Series
Eko, Walmart and Mattel

KidHQ

Interactive branded video experience KidHQ launched during the 2019 holiday season. Powered by interactive video pioneer Eko, the campaign featured a multi-floor virtual toy store for kids. With nothing but a smartphone screen, kids could explore branded experiences from Walmart and Mattel, then share their “Toy Report” wish list to help parents discover what their kids wanted for the holidays. All told, 139,000 wish lists were shared.

Insights

With a fully interactive virtual experience, the teams developed an alternative to visiting Santa for the digitally plugged-in Alpha generation. Nothing drives holiday toy purchases like empowering kids to simplify their parents’ seasonal shopping trips.
Best Influencer-Generated Content
H Code and TurboTax

#TaxMitos

With the #TaxMitos campaign, H Code and Turbo Tax leveraged Hispanic influencers to address key entry barriers for the U.S. Hispanic community when it came to tax filing. The campaign addressed topics such as fear and uncertainty. Running across Instagram, Facebook and YouTube, it landed nearly 3.5 million impressions — about double the initial goal.

Insights

Using culturally relevant influencers and a comic tone to address a decidedly heavy topic, H Code and TurboTax proved that humor is powerful — and cultural resonance even more so.
Nonprofit organization Girls Who Code launched its #MarchForSisterhood campaign to advance its twin goals of closing the gender gap in technology and changing the image of what a programmer looks like. The digital march enabled allies to bring global awareness to the issues they cared about most by submitting a march video with the hashtag #MarchForSisterhood. The campaign generated nearly 1 billion impressions.

By taking its march into digital terrain, Moving Image & Content and Girls Who Code bridged the gap between online and offline activism — and they empowered their audience to tell their stories, which is central to reaching for impression-counts like the ones this campaign achieved.
The new podcast from fashion brand PrettyLittleThing featured candid girl talk between influencers, with topics including body positivity, toxic relationships and more. The podcast provided PrettyLittleThing with a lifestyle platform to discuss sensitive issues like mental health with its audience of young, social-media-connected women.

With its new podcast, PrettyLittleThing asserted itself as an empathetic brand that’s deeply in touch with the concerns of its customers. Know thy audience — don’t just sell to them.
Faced with the reality that its “why buy” features weren’t converting new audiences, tech company Atlassian reinvented its Work Life blog to focus more on the target buyer and the real-life issues that the brand could help them with. With a wholesale change in design and editorial voice, Atlassian built a site that truly helped readers get better at their jobs.

Atlassian’s content had been focused on new product releases and features — but a new editorial focus on well-informed tips for succeeding at work changed all that. Expertise can go a lot further than product pitches.
Best Branded Content Site - B2C

The Weather Channel

Forecast: Change

The Weather Channel’s campaign, which involved a temporary rebranding as “The Water Channel,” generated awareness and action in support of clean water across the globe. The Weather Channel tied the campaign launch to World Environment Day, ultimately receiving 346 million impressions. More importantly, The Weather Channel inspired its audience to donate 100 million liters of clean water to 16,000 people in Cambodia and Niger.

Insights

Thanks to the ‘Forecast: Change’ campaign, The Weather Channel received a whopping 34-percent boost in brand affinity. Often enough, doing authentically good things translates into doing the most good for a brand’s relationship with its audiences.
Airbnb presented deeply reported features on topics such as African immigrants in Palermo, Italy; foot culture in Hatay, Turkey; and road tennis in Barbados. With its Homes & Hosts stories, the brand highlighted the experiences of Airbnb hosts around the world, and the homes and experiences they offer. And with its Insider’s Guides, the magazine also offered tips on traveling in cities like Nairobi, Beirut, and Buenos Aires.
Partnerships

The prevalent theme among this year’s winning partnerships continued to be the concept of show-don’t-tell. Whether that’s powerful video that demonstrated a commitment to going big for the right reasons, or it was taking products into the world and proving what they can do — these campaigns put their claims to the test right in front of their audiences’ eyes.
Best Agency/Client Collaboration
Rogers and Cowan PMK and Verizon Media

Portfolio
Rogers and Cowan PMK and Verizon Media extended their long-standing relationship to plan a sustained campaign showcasing huge moments, from bringing the AIDS epidemic-focused documentary 5B to a national audience to debuting the music video “Earth,” by Lil Dickey.

Insights
By exploring causes ranging from HIV/AIDS to tackling the climate crisis, the partners delved deeply into important social causes. Acknowledging the issues that consumers care about brings them close, driving engagement and boosting shares within an audience based on positive sentiment.
Best Brand/Influencer Collaboration
Samsung, So.da and Popp Rok

#PowerUp
To convey the full power of the Samsung Galaxy Note10+, Samsung collaborated with digital agency So.da and production company Popp Rok for a Twitter-exclusive content series with filmmaker Director X. Across four videos, the series highlighted three up-and-coming music video directors learning how to shoot and edit professional-quality video entirely on a Note 10+.

Insights
With Director X, Samsung picked the perfect influencer and content format to efficiently demonstrate the capabilities of its new product. For brands making a claim for best-in-class, proving that candidacy means testing the boundaries and showing the audience what their product can achieve.
Best Advertising Partner for Brands
Innocean USA

The Art of the Stunt
In partnership with car brand Genesis, Innocean USA created a series of cinematic content pieces designed to win over hardcore auto enthusiasts. The end result: 22 million impressions and 10 million views.

Insights
When you’re marketing a new car, it’s smart to show what it’s really capable of. When a car can replicate stunts from the ‘Fast and the Furious’ franchise, it’s the real deal.
This year’s strategic visionaries looked to technologically unprecedented interactive experiences, innovative social activations and even classic print formats. Across all these approaches, however, two themes formed throughlines. Chief among them was the concept of putting the right character or actor into the story an advertiser is trying to tell, and that takes knowing your audience and what they’ll find appealing, engaging and even scary if it’s done in the right way. Personalization also drove winning strategies this year, whether achieved by programmatic technology or a way of telling a story that simply made it feel personal in terms of audience stakes.
Best Multi-Channel Content Distribution Strategy
Schibsted Brand Studio and Equinor

Climate and Energy - Easily Explained
To communicate with stakeholders about its decision to transition to a broader focus on new forms of energy, Norwegian oil and gas producer Equinor produced episodes of advertiser-funded content to be shared via Forklart, Norway’s most popular news podcast. The episodes provided insights into key issues including oil and gas, renewable energy and climate solutions.

Insights
Equinor aligned its message with a respected news podcast and their strategy centralized this effective casting of the right actors for the story — namely Forklart. As such, the authenticity and expertise the campaign could convey was amplified by the halo of the outlet, which had some of both to lend.
Best Use of Native Advertising/Sponsored Content
Atlantic Re:think and HBO

Watchmen: The Massacre of Black Wall Street

The HBO series ‘Watchmen’ opens with a harrowing depiction of the 1921 Tulsa race massacre. But the network decided to take its exploration of one of the ugliest moments in American history even further, hiring The Atlantic’s sponsored content arm to create a graphic novella — and an associated article — exploring the tragic event. The project generated 347,000 page views and was picked up in numerous mainstream media outlets.

HBO and Atlantic Re:think recognized the seriousness of their subject matter, approaching it with the proper historical reverence and moral horror. With the right strategic partners, even programs with entertainment as their core intent can inspire momentous conversations.
Most Innovative Use of Content
Barkley and HARIBO

Chewy Channel
To bring attention to its brand, which is new to the US market, candy company HARIBO launched a new streaming network for short attention spans — very short attention spans. Episodes run for 15 seconds, following gummy-type creatures through western adventures, office dramas and more. The episodes, built for IGTV, exceeded ad benchmarks by 200 percent and garnered 4.2 million views.

Insights
HARIBO wanted viewers to microbinge content as quickly as they microbinge its candy. Effective sponsored content marries content to product — and in this case, both proved short and sweet — and highlights how content trumps format, too. It’s not just that the ads are quick and shareable; they’re first and foremost engaging and appealing.
Kerv partnered with Callaway Golf to launch a video campaign focused on Callaway’s new Jaws MD5 Wedges. The interactive videos used Kerv Interactive’s technology to create customized content experiences, serving different audiences unique creative based on their engagement patterns. The campaign was delivered programmatically via desktop and mobile.

Callaway Golf looked beyond standard advertising techniques, seizing on troves of data to serve audiences the ad experience they preferred. From a golf-club grip to an ad campaign, personalization drives results.
Most Original Use of Social
McKinney and Orion Pictures

Child’s Play
To drive interest in the horror revival’s theatrical release, McKinney and Orion Pictures took to Pinterest to jolt pinners out of their usual comfort zones. The campaign startled users with images of Chucky slashing his way through ads. The companies took the killer doll’s mischief a step further with the first-ever branded Reddit bot, which engaged users in frightening conversations. Redditors didn’t seem to mind: With more than 40,000 comments, it was the most successful ad in Reddit’s history.

Insights
In a stark departure from the feel-good content that dominates the social media landscape, McKinney and Orion Pictures decided to give their users the chills. Always know your genre — and its fans — and if brands put the right character or actor in the right role, audiences will react.
Best Use of Video

IBM Originals

Together with the David Clark Cause, United Nations and the American Red Cross, IBM Originals created the world’s largest hackathon. The brand opened up its code patterns for AI, IOT and blockchain, inspiring developers to build breakthrough solutions for how to better respond to natural disasters. As part of the campaign, the brand filmed a documentary showcasing what its master hackers could accomplish, distributing it across its paid, earned and owned channels.

IBM Originals used a creative video execution to powerfully convey its messages and goals. When mobilizing one’s audience carries life-or-death stakes, emotional resonance helps drive the message home.
Best Use of Real-Time Streaming Video
160over90 and W Hotels

Wake Up Call Dubai
W Hotels gave the festival experience a luxe upgrade, granting Marriott Bonvoy Members unprecedented insider access to DJs and musicians while spotlighting luxury experiences in some of the world’s hottest travel destinations, including Dubai, Bali and Barcelona. The campaign’s YouTube livestream pulled in 10.6 million views.

Insights
W Hotels recognized that elaborate and alluring experiences can transcend physical locale. Digital viewers want to associate themselves with luxury travel — even when they’re not experiencing it.
Grand Prix

There’s simply no better way to put it: Our Grand Prix winners killed it. From igniting a national phenomenon with a new chicken sandwich to providing brand partners with a vast array of content options, this year’s winners told countless stories across countless channels — and always nailed the message. The operating theme in the category for 2020: diverse approaches and deep benches make for standout teams, studios and agencies that can swing big, connect and knock campaigns out of the park.
Most Engaged Brand Community
GSD&M and Popeyes

Chicken Wars
Popeyes was decades late to making a chicken sandwich. The brand’s first, modest goal was to become passably competitive with Chick-fil-A; instead, it earned its restaurants customer lines that stretched around the block. Everything started with a 360-degree campaign leveraging user-generated content to ignite Popeyes’ die-hards and create a ripple effect of influence. The company became the talk of social media, ignited a genuine societal phenomenon and sold 16 times more sandwiches than expected.

Insights
Popeyes recognized that user-generated conversation was the key to moving its product. The sandwich was really just that good; all the brand needed to do was get its fans talking about it.
The growing BDG portfolio includes Bustle, Romper, Elite Daily, The Zoe Report, Nylon, Mic, Inverse and Input — an audience of 85 million monthly readers and counting. The company’s in-house brand studio offers an array of services, including content strategy, production, distribution, proprietary research, influencer marketing and experiential executions. To date, BDG’s branded-content offerings have included more than 375 campaigns, driving a bulk of the company’s direct digital revenue. Top-tier clients including Hilton, Mattel, Macy’s and Walmart.

BDGS boasts many strengths, but perhaps none are greater than its connection to a diverse and growing group of properties, with brands ranging in focus from science to women’s lifestyle. A content studio can thrive when it has a generous canvas across which to tell stories — that’s an environment in which a full spectrum of services can fully emerge, evolve and become powerful.
Content Marketing Agency of the Year
Rogers & Cowan PMK

During the first year following the merger between Rogers & Cowan and PMK BNC, the combined agency’s output included documentary films, novels and a first-ever projection-mapping life event experience at the United Nations. In one socially resonant execution, the agency handled the release campaign for Verizon Media Group’s 5B, a story of everyday heroes and caregivers during the first AIDS epidemic.

Insights
Rogers & Cowan tackled an immense variety of formats and channels, often with an eye toward social good. For content marketers, there’s no such thing as too ambitious, or too altruistic. And, again, a wide-spectrum approach to topics, themes and outputs means a studio that’s bringing more to the table in more ways, and that’s a driving factor in this year’s winner’s success.
The Digiday Awards include 14 different programs yearly, with focuses on video, content marketing, media and technology, among others. Competitors’ brands are placed in front of judging panels made up of C-Level leaders from leading organizations, and winners are featured in Digiday’s media coverage, marketing, Awards Guides, livestream galas and other announcements. The Content Marketing Awards have recognized the companies and campaigns using content to modernize media and marketing since 2014.

For more information on this or other Digiday Awards programs, visit digiday.com/awards

Questions for the awards team? Let us know at awards@digiday.com