

HOW ALTERNATIVE ENERGY COMPANIES

*Can Generate More Sales
with **Content Marketing***





It's tough to be a marketer at an energy company these days.

Every piece of content, from campaign collateral to customer disclosures, typically goes through a lengthy legal review process.

Whether you work for a large, established energy company or an emerging one, chances are your job description has changed several times over the past few years as priorities shift and departments restructure.

To make it more complicated, identifying your typical buyer might feel like shooting at a moving target. Whether you're marketing to commercial, industrial or residential energy users, their perceptions of alternative energy as a viable solution likely vary widely depending on their region, experience and even political views.

This is an industry fueled by educated buyers, yet misinformation runs rampant. Marketers fight a constant battle to dispel myths, change long-ingrained habits and convince key stakeholders they'll see a return on their investment.

That's where you come in. There's a lot of work to be done to educate buyers, but with it comes tremendous opportunity to fill a need. As you fill that need, you'll naturally build stronger brand awareness, attract more qualified buyers and gain loyal customers.

CONTENT MARKETING:

An Essential Part of the Sales Cycle

You may have noticed it's becoming more and more difficult to entice journalists to write features on your latest innovations. There are so many other technologies competing for attention that it's hard to stand out in the crowd – unless you cut out the middleman and take matters into your own hands. Essentially, that's what content marketing is: Telling your own story, in your own words.

You may not have a separate line item for content marketing in your budget (yet), but chances are, you're already doing it at some level.

CONTENT MARKETING
is the art of communicating with your
customers & prospects without selling.

Instead of pitching your products or services, you are delivering information to educate your buyers so they are better prepared to make a purchase when the time is right.

According to the [Content Marketing Institute](#), the essence of this strategy is the belief that if we, as businesses, deliver consistent, ongoing valuable information to buyers, they ultimately reward us with their business and loyalty.

And they do. In fact, content marketing holds such potential that

56% of [North American marketers](#) have reported
spending more money on content creation in
the past 12 months.



This is largely because the internet and the mobile revolution have transformed the way consumers search for a solution to their problems, consider their options and, ultimately, make the decision to buy.

Information is power, and your prospects have it in abundance.

CONSIDER THIS:

80
PERCENT

About **80 percent of the sales cycle now takes place online**, before a prospect ever picks up the phone.

25
PERCENT

By 2020, **25 percent of customer service operations** will use virtual customer assistants.
(Gartner Research)

7.8
TIMES

Content marketing leaders see **7.8 times more website traffic** than those who do not produce content.
(Kapost)

“Content marketing” isn’t a buzzword, a trend or a stand-alone campaign. It’s an ongoing strategy that should be integrated with all your marketing efforts, from your social media posts to your sales emails.

{ The goal is to reach the right customers with the right content at the right time. }

GETTING STARTED

With Content Marketing

How do you know what your brand has to say? Here are some questions to get you started with content marketing:

THE AUDIENCE

- Who is your audience?
- Are multiple stakeholders involved?

THE PROBLEM

- What problem does your audience face?
- Is your audience aware of this problem?
- Does each stakeholder have the same problem?

THE SOLUTION

- How do you help solve this problem?
- Are there different solutions for different stakeholders?

THE CONTENT

- What information can you use to educate your audience about
 - The problem?
 - Your solution?
 - How other solutions compare to your solution?

Your answers will point you in the right direction to create the content your audience wants to see. This content may take the form of blog posts, whitepapers, case studies, videos, press releases, articles and more. Develop the content that makes sense for your audience, and focus on being educational, not pushy.

Defining Your BUYER PERSONAS

Before you can create the right content to educate your buyers, you need to better understand who they are, what they need and what questions they have. That's where your buyer personas come in.

BUYER PERSONAS
are detailed narratives about
your ideal buyers.

Buyer personas go beyond demographic information. They include a number of important considerations that are important to remember as you move forward with your content marketing efforts, such as:

- Their primary and secondary goals
- Their biggest challenges and frustrations
- Where they look for information
- Who influences them, and whom they have the power to influence
- What questions they have while considering your product or service

One of the best ways to find answers to these questions is to interview some of your current and potential customers. You may even want to consider interviewing those who decided not to buy from you or bought from a competitor, which can give you valuable insights.



HERE'S A SNAPSHOT

of what a buyer persona might look like for a customer in your industry:

FRANK THE FACILITIES MANAGER



ABOUT

Age: 40-65

Title: Building and Grounds Manager

Income: \$50,000-\$75,000

Education: High school diploma + some college and/or certification

Preferred Channels: Facilities Manager Magazine, Fox News

PRIMARY GOALS

- Ensure smooth operation of facilities
- Keep costs low

PAIN POINTS

- Concerned about rising utility costs
- Doesn't have time to monitor energy usage or prices
- CEO wants company to use more sustainable sources of energy but doesn't have the budget to invest in on-site solar or wind generation

COMMON QUESTIONS

- How can I reduce our electricity usage?
- How can I achieve greater budget certainty?
- How can I implement more sustainable energy practices?

SOLUTIONS FROM YOUR COMPANY

- Building automation
- Solar power payment plan

Once you have a better understanding of your buyers, you can begin to map out the type of information they're likely to want at each stage (awareness, consideration, decision, delight) in their journey.

HERE'S HOW THAT

might look for someone like Frank . . .

● AWARENESS

- (Blog post) Your Building's Biggest Energy Hogs
- (Checklist) 10 Steps to Winterizing Your Building

● CONSIDERATION

- (Blog post) 5 Advantages of Using Building Automation
- (Assessment) Is Your Building a Good Candidate For Solar Power?

● DECISION

- (Case Study) How This California Company Reduced Its Energy Usage By 40% With Solar Power
- (Checklist) 10 Questions to Ask Before Beginning Your Solar Project



THE REGULATORY & LEGAL

Review Process

The energy industry has always been tightly regulated, but the Dodd-Frank Act gave even more power to regulators like the Commodity Futures Trading Commission, SEC and Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) to enforce any perceived attempts to manipulate energy prices.

According to [FERC](#), regulators once had to prove a company had the means, the motive and the intention to manipulate prices. Now, they only have to prove that manipulative and deceptive devices, i.e., fraud and fraud-based manipulative devices and contrivances, (were) employed intentionally or recklessly, regardless of whether the conduct in question was intended to create or did create an artificial price.

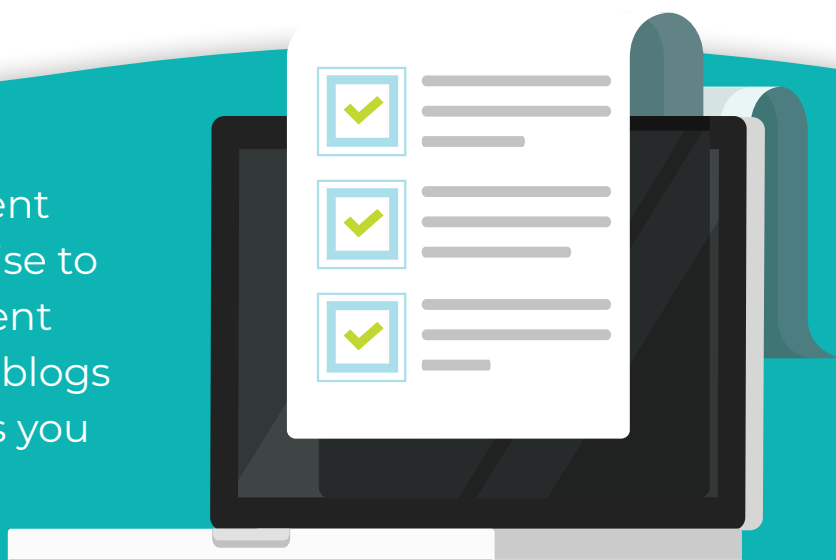
That's why it's so important to avoid making predictions about energy prices or making unsubstantiated claims about your product or service.

Something as seemingly innocuous as implying your customers will receive lower energy bills in the coming year as a result of your product or service could be perceived as price manipulation.

If your organization has a regulatory or legal team, it's critical you involve them early in the content creation process.

Early buy-in from your regulatory and legal team can streamline the final review and shave significant time off the entire process. It will also prevent you from inadvertently saying something that could ultimately be damaging to your organization.

As you begin your content marketing efforts, it's wise to create a shared document outlining guidelines for blogs and any other resources you plan to create.



In addition to branding guidelines, **this document should spell out your brand's style, primary buyers, tone, topics, imagery, terms to avoid and anything else that's important to note.** Here are a few examples of legal notes spelled out in one energy provider's content guidelines.



For legal reasons, blogs cannot make predictions about specific energy rates or hint at insider knowledge of the market.



Avoid using terms such as “hedging,” “pricing” or “partnership.”



When referring to sustainability practices, avoid using “sustainable” unless the practices meet specific LEED qualifications for energy efficiency.



Avoid general references to “green” or “carbon footprint” not backed by facts. (For example, “greenhouse gases” are quantifiable, but “carbon footprint” is not.)

Taking the time to gain consensus on important legal matters will give you greater confidence about your content and help you avoid missteps along the way.

Larger companies may also want to spell out the approval process in writing, designating which key stakeholders and legal advisers must sign off on each piece of content created for a specific region or industry vertical.

HOW TO DISTRIBUTE

Your Content

In the next section, we'll explore four ways to distribute your content: owned media, shared media, earned media and paid media. Each has its advantages and disadvantages, so consider them all, and make the choice that's right for your brand. Whichever platforms you choose, leverage them strategically to promote your content and build the brand awareness that will attract and retain customers, drive sales and increase profits.



CONTENT IS KING
but **distribution** is queen,
and she wears the pants.

— Jonathan Perleman, BuzzFeed

NO. 1

Educate Buyers through Owned Media

Owned media is content you create and have total control over — your company website or blog, for instance. As you proceed in your content marketing strategy by creating new, unique and informative content, you should always promote this material on your owned media.

YOUR WEBSITE

Your website should be the hub of your entire brand awareness strategy. Everything you do with your content should point customers back to your website for more information. Here are a few tips for building a website that will best educate your buyers.

- **Link to foundational content.**

Create a strong call-to-action showcasing your biggest and best content — possibly a whitepaper, special report, eBook or other major piece of foundational information. You may want to require customers to provide an email address before they can access this information, which will allow you to send additional information to the customer, such as a newsletter or links to blog posts.

- **Build a library of resources.**

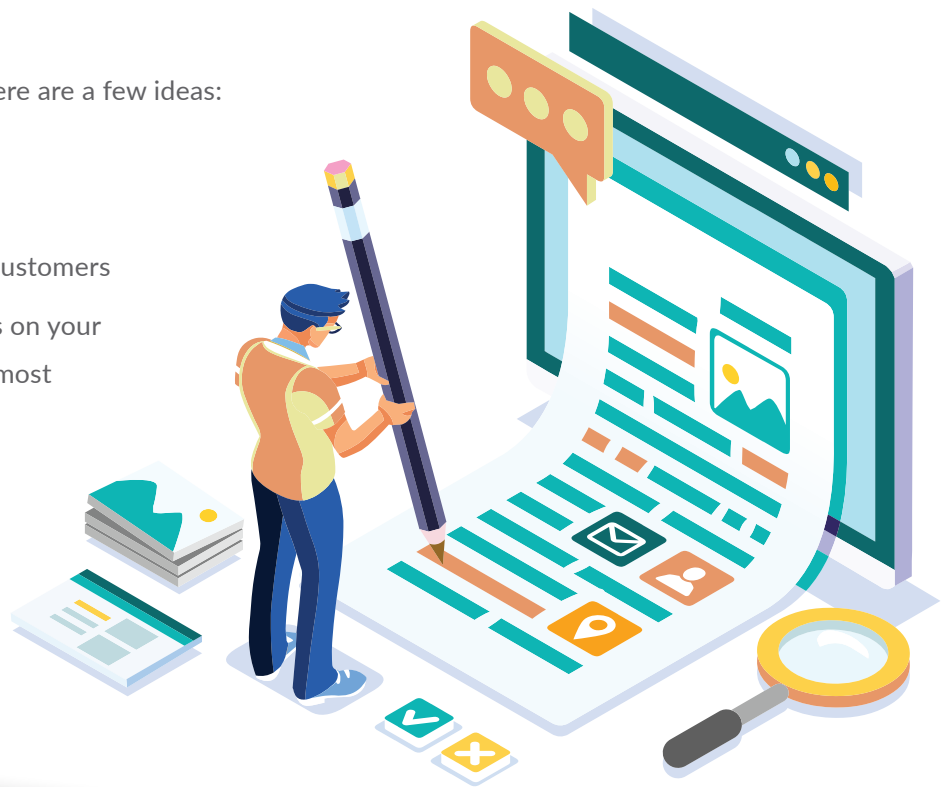
Don't stop there! Keep developing more content that educates your audience about its problem, your solution and how other solutions compare to yours. Your goal is to build a rich arsenal of informative materials in many shapes and formats. Group these resources together on your website so readers can easily find this content.

YOUR BLOG

Your blog can be an incredibly powerful educational tool, as long as you do it well. It's critical that you invest the time and effort to develop the right volume of smart, strategic blog content.

Consider this point: Marketers with blogs generate [67 percent more leads](#). And yet marketers with small blogs (fewer than 10 posts) generate results similar to those with [no blog](#). In other words, if you can't do it right, don't do it at all.

- **How often should you add blog posts?** The answer is whatever frequency is realistic for you to consistently maintain. The more the better, so long as it is steady.
- **What should you write about?** Here are a few ideas:
 - Recent industry news
 - Exciting innovations and trends
 - Frequent questions from your customers
 - Keyword research and analytics on your website to find the topics that most interest your customers



Remember, the primary purpose of your blog is to educate your customers, not promote your own products or services.

If your blog is filled with bland product updates and recycled press releases, it won't be a place where your customers will want to return again and again for reliable industry news.

[Green Mountain Energy](#) is an Austin-based electric company with service offerings in seven states. Here's an example of how it uses its blog to educate readers about solar energy, the advantages of buying or leasing solar panels and ways to reduce your impact on the environment.

The blog hits on one of the biggest questions potential buyers have about investing in solar power: will it increase home value? In a recent [blog post](#), Green Mountain lays out the perks of installing solar panels, the process of choosing the right ones for your home and that they could add \$15,000 to a home's value.

You'll notice the **blog contains several phrases someone researching solar power would be likely to search for online**, including "cost of solar panels," "solar-equipped homes" and a common question: "how much value do solar panels add to a home?"

This is a blog post that has clearly been optimized for search, and it contains the type of useful information potential buyers need to see. In fact, they may need to see it numerous times and in various formats before they'll be convinced. That's why a blog post like this should be shared again and again across social media, linked back to in other blogs, and even repurposed for other industry publications that have a wider reach than Green Mountain's own audience.

The post should also be periodically updated with new information as it becomes available so it will continue to appear in search results and drive traffic to the Green Mountain website for years to come.

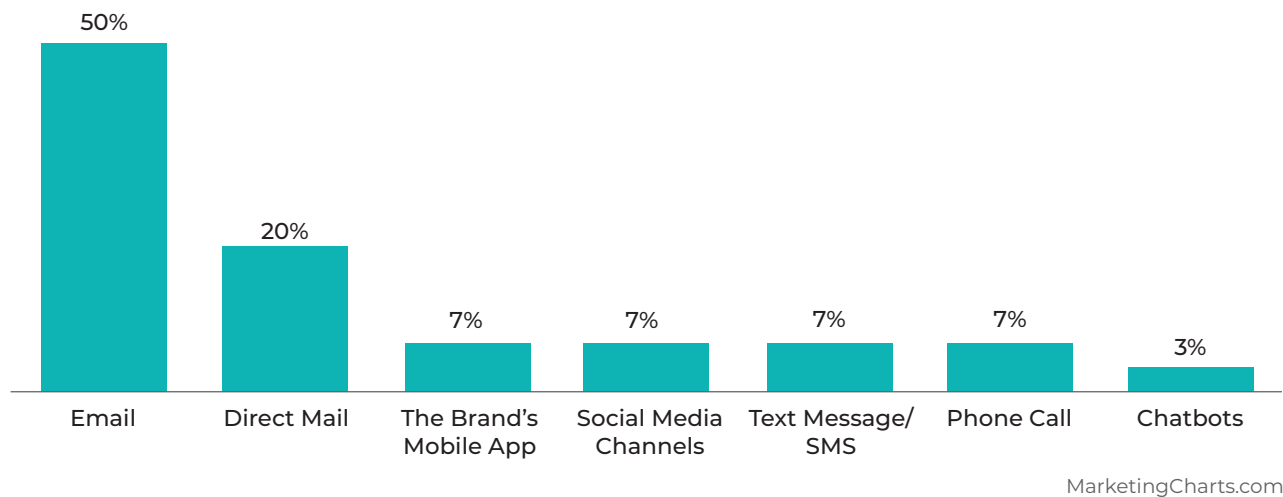


EMAIL MARKETING

Once you have captured some basic information from prospects and customers, email is one of the most reliable ways to continue building a relationship with them. In fact, a survey conducted by [Adobe](#) showed customers preferred brands contact them via email rather than any other mode of contact.

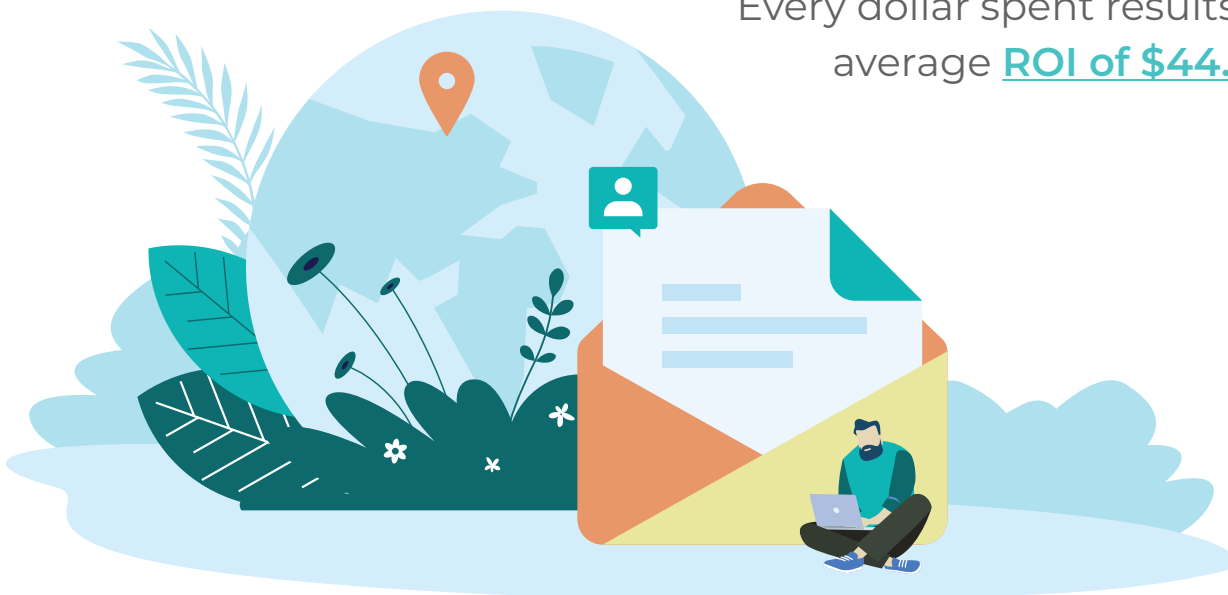
Consumer Comfort With Brand Communication by Channel

Based on an unweighted survey of 1,001 U.S. white-collar workers who own a smartphone, 54% of whom are ages 35-64.



Studies also have shown email marketing has a significantly higher return on investment compared with other marketing initiatives.

Every dollar spent results in an average [ROI of \\$44.7](#).



Here are a few best practices to keep in mind to achieve a higher ROI from your email marketing efforts:



- **SEGMENT YOUR DATABASE.** Don't bug your current customers with the same content you're sending to prospects, as their needs are completely different. Even within your list of current customers, you likely have opportunities to segment by region, services, renewal date and much more. The more relevant the message, the better it will be received.



- **AUTOMATE IT.** Using marketing automation software to establish email workflows triggered by certain actions, such as downloading a piece of content, will help you move your prospects closer to making a decision and ensure you're keeping current customers informed of your latest and greatest tips, offerings and more.



- **TEST EVERYTHING.** Test subject lines, calls-to-action and even email formats. In some industries, for example, plain text emails tend to be better received than those that appear to be heavily designed.



- **MEASURE RESULTS.** Look at open rates, click-through rates and click-to-open rates to assess the effectiveness of your email campaigns. By paying attention to these metrics over time, you will be able to determine what types of emails work best for your audience.



NO. 2

Educate Customers through Shared Media

Shared media is content that is co-created through social interaction. It's a user review, a conversation on your Facebook page or a series of retweets on Twitter. Shared media can propagate quickly, spreading from one individual's social network to others and so on.

ACCESSING SHARED MEDIA

To capitalize on the power of shared media to build your brand awareness, you must be active on social media. But the sheer enormity of social media can present both exciting opportunities and daunting challenges. [On average](#), marketers leverage as many as six different social media platforms to build brand awareness, the most popular being Facebook, YouTube and Instagram. How do you know which one is right for your brand?

Each channel has its own nuances, approaches and personalities. [Brenda S. Stoltz](#), an email marketing and lead gen professional, once tweeted a terrific analogy:

"I like to say that Twitter is like a bar, Facebook is your living room and LinkedIn is the local chamber of commerce."

It's easy to get distracted trying to establish a presence on each of the various channels and forget your larger objectives.



As you try to decide which platforms to leverage, here are a few questions to ask:

- **Where are our customers and potential customers engaging most often**, and how can we naturally join the conversation?
- **Where do our competitors have an established presence?**
- **What are our main reasons for using social media?** (To inform? To build brand awareness? To increase traffic to our website or conversions?)
- **How will we measure success?** Should we focus on engagement metrics such as likes, shares and retweets? Or are we more concerned about the number of visitors we drive to our website or the number of people who ultimately become customers?
- **What type of content do we plan to share most, and what outlets are best suited for it?**
If you create massive wind turbines and want to show them in operation, YouTube will be an ideal channel, while LinkedIn may be better if you plan to share more industry research and whitepapers.
- **How often will we engage?** Participating in social media is more like running a marathon than a sprint. This is a long-haul strategy that will take time. Content has a much shorter lifespan on some channels, like Twitter, so you'll need to post more frequently to get noticed there compared with other platforms like Facebook or Instagram.

Consider how Suzlon, a global wind turbine manufacturing company, uses Facebook to enter the conversation about climate change by posting a video of its executive talking to Bloomberg TV about what it's doing to be part of the solution.





Remember, the key to using social media is to engage with your followers. Few companies do this better than General Electric. Its Facebook page features a mix of fascinating scientific facts, contests, images, inspirational quotes and more—and that's just one channel. It even used a special filter to engage with fans on Snapchat.

Although the GE Snapchat filter is branded, that isn't the point of this post. The point is to engage with people and create something that's fun to share. As you work to develop your presence on social media, you may remember hearing about the 80/20 rule: **80 percent of your posts should be educational and interesting, while only 20 percent should be promotional.**

Here's the thing: With the rapid growth of social media marketing, [there is no golden rule anymore](#). When creating your digital strategy, you need to work out a ratio that works best for you, test it and adjust.

NO. 3

Educate Buyers through Earned Media

Earned media is content created by channels other than your own, such as a news article about your company's latest innovation. Succeeding with earned media requires a deliberate strategy for building trust and creating communities.

However, the payoff can be tremendous. Consider this: [A Nielsen/inPowered study](#) found earned media is 88 percent more effective than owned media. [A similar report](#) goes on to say consumers rely on trusted content to make purchasing decisions five times more today than they did five years ago. In other words, earned media is simply too powerful to ignore.

ACCESSING EARNED MEDIA

With earned media, you work to influence people to write about or publish information about your company. Your goal is to gain a reputation as a leader in your industry by being mentioned as often as possible by other industry leaders.

You can do this through:

- **Press releases.** If you can give an editor a great idea for a story — or better yet, provide the actual story — you'll position your brand as a leader for the publication's readers, and you'll position your brand as a hero to the editor.
- **Guest blogging.** Look for blogs relevant to both your industry and your audience, ideally with a large and engaged audience. Once you've identified some targets, take time to become familiar with the blog and pitch the editor with an idea for a guest post. Keep in mind the post should be something the publication would naturally cover and not a blatant product pitch.
- **Word of mouth.** This can include everything from customer referrals to online product reviews and mentions on social media.

Consider [this article](#) by Clean Technica about how Stanford University designed underwater solar cells that convert greenhouse gas into fuel. Chances are, the article started with a pitch from Stanford, but Clean Technica ran with it because it's an innovation with the potential to transform the way the world uses greenhouse gases. It aligns with Clean Technica's mission to be a leader in alternative energy news.

In addition to Clean Technica, here are some other news outlets alternative energy companies should explore:

- [Midwest Energy News](#)
- [Green Tech Media](#)
- [New York Times energy sections](#)
- [Renewable Energy World](#)

Take the time to build relationships with reporters who cover your industry. You can find them by [creating an influencer stream on Twitter](#) and learning more about their areas of interest, then reaching out when you have news they won't be able to resist.

NO. 4

Educate Buyers through Paid Media

Paid media is content you pay a channel to promote. Traditionally this has meant paid advertising, such as print ads, television or radio commercials. But in today's digital world, paid media often refers to display ads, paid search and native advertising. Native advertising refers to sponsored content, such as sponsored posts on Facebook feeds or sponsored articles on a magazine's website.

Paid media can present you with a real opportunity to take your brand to the next level by achieving a larger scale and reaching potentially millions of people with the content you produce.

The channels you use will depend largely on your goals and where your audience goes for information; you should be willing to do a fair amount of experimenting.

{ That said,
you have to start somewhere. }



Here are four paid channels worth trying:

GOOGLE ADS

As one of the most common forms of pay-per-click (PPC) advertising, [Google Ads](#), is easy to use and allows you to clearly see the returns on your investment, in terms of clicks. For at least some of your potential customers, this could represent a first step in the buyer's journey.

You can set a daily budget and maximum cost-per-click bid, which can be easily adjusted at any time.

Once you know what search terms perform best, you can tweak your strategy and spending. Google's Report Editor gives users a more finely tuned way to sort, filter and visualize data from their PPC campaigns. Be aware that like all paid channels, Google Ads isn't something you can "fix and forget." You'll need to check it frequently and make adjustments as you go.



Google Ads

LINKEDIN

[LinkedIn ads and sponsored content](#) allow you to increase the visibility of your content.

The ability to target by job title, industry, company size and even seniority makes it the top channel for reaching B2B audiences. You can assign a daily budget or a total budget to a campaign and run the sponsored content for any time period, giving you a lot of flexibility.

The amount you choose to spend on LinkedIn will vary depending on your budget and industry, but keep in mind you could easily spend \$25 on a few clicks. That means you should plan to allot at least a few hundred dollars each month to see results.



NATIVE ADVERTISING

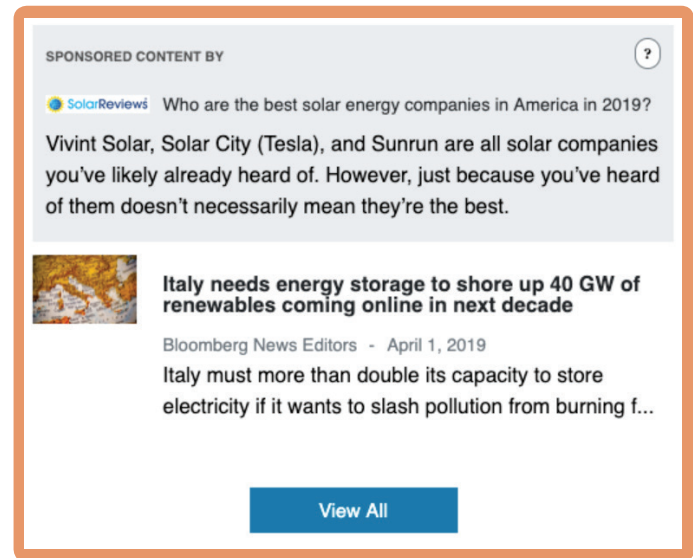
Companies pay for sponsored content to appear on the websites of traditional publications like *Forbes* or *CNN*. The content is formatted to look like other stories but is designated as “sponsored.”

This article on the best solar energy companies in America is a piece of sponsored content by SolarReviews and appears on the *Forbes* website when readers are exploring topics related to alternative energy. With native advertising, you can choose your target audience and use your company’s own blog articles to capture their attention.

This is an increasingly effective way to attract new audiences, especially for highly technical companies with limited visibility online.

Consider the success of one cable manufacturing company, which promoted two blog posts on a native advertising platform.

With a monthly budget of \$2,000 over a four-month period, the company saw:



1,086%

increase in
blog traffic

71%

increase in
blog subscribers

119%

increase in
website traffic

6,000

blog views
between the
two posts

35

CTA clicks

If your company wants to accelerate the results of your content marketing efforts, **native advertising is a great way to do it.**

SPONSORED WEBINARS

Sponsoring a webinar hosted by a media outlet or partner company puts your message in front of a different audience and may allow you to add new contacts to your database. Larger companies typically charge several thousands of dollars for this type of sponsorship, but you may be able to find other opportunities for a mutually beneficial partnership that costs nothing. Green Tech Media offers opportunities for alternative energy companies like Longi Solar to sponsor webinars that make sense for both parties, like this one:

WEBINAR:

Value of Technology and Material Choice for PV Modules

Thursday March 28, 2019 2:00 PM ET

A GTM WEBINAR SUPPORTED BY:

LONGISolar

[VIEW ARCHIVE](#)



As the PV industry continues to grow, systems have achieved better performance at drastically lower costs compared to just a few years ago. Moving forward, quality and reliability of systems will be increasingly important to ensure consistent performance and output from PV projects. Choosing the right technology and materials to improve system energy yield and long-term performance will provide valuable benefits to our customers and help them to realize lower LCOE. In this webinar, we will review mono PERC and Bifacial PERC technology and discuss how they can improve both PV system performance and costs with higher power output, higher energy yield and better reliability.

Speakers Include:



**Kaushik Roy
Choudhury**

Global Technical Leader
of PV Reliability, DuPont
Photovoltaic and
Advanced Materials



**Hongbin Fang,
Ph.D.**

Director of Product
Marketing, LONGI Solar



PUTTING IT ALL

Into Practice

What does it look like when all these elements are working together? Often, it means having a team dedicated to content creation, design, social media and traditional PR and advertising. For smaller startups, this might all be the same team of just a few people. Large national or global companies will typically have a team responsible for each of these roles. Companies that don't have the resources to do this in-house may outsource at least some aspects to an agency that can work with marketers and key stakeholders to prioritize content and determine how to best promote it.

For one leading competitive energy supplier, ramping up its content marketing efforts meant dedicating an in-house team to content creation and partnering with Kuno Creative to assist with writing, optimizing and posting blogs.

The company had been posting blogs three to four times per month and relying primarily on its own staff to write them, but it was difficult to maintain a consistent schedule when staff members became overwhelmed with other priorities.

Content marketing statistics show that companies that increase blogging from three to five times per month to six to eight times per month double the amount of organic traffic they receive, so it was clear the company would need to blog more frequently to achieve its goals.

The company began working with Kuno to ramp up its blogging efforts, develop more targeted regional newsletters and segmented emails to improve open rates.



The combination of email marketing, blogging and content resulted in a **419 percent increase in organic traffic** and an **82 percent increase in blog subscribers** in a single month.

Within a year, the company had 3,385 business contacts at 305 companies signed up to receive blog and content-related emails—a nearly **940 percent increase**.

Growing organic traffic takes more time and effort than paying for search ads, but the payoff can be enormous, as our client discovered. Combine content marketing with other demand generation tactics, such as paid advertising, and you'll reap big benefits.

{ **NEED A TRUSTED PARTNER** }
to help you educate your customers? }



is a leading inbound marketing agency with specific expertise in creating content for alternative energy companies.

Learn more about how we can
help you achieve your goals.

