The content strategist as a business consultant

28 October 2020

Topic:

Content strategy roles

Teachers

Course

Teaser

What is a *content strategist*? In practice and literature, this role is understood in many different and often conflicting ways. In her introductory lecture, Rahel Bailie explained, why she understands content strategists as business consultants specialized in content.

Relevance

The tasks of content strategists are not as clearly defined as those of other professions and roles in digital business. This makes it difficult for freelance content strategists to describe what services they provide, and it makes content strategists who work in-house the go-to girl for everything on content-related tasks that no one else wants to play. To be a successful in the profession, it’s important to clearly define the role of the content strategist. Rahel Bailie therefore clearly distinguished the role of content strategists from other roles at the very beginning of her introduction to content strategy, comparing it to a similar role, that of business consultant.

Picture

Caption: STONKS! Just like the woman in this licence-free picture we found on the internet, a content strategist must convince business that a change in strategy will bring an increase in revenue and other desirable things. The only difference is, that a content strategist will need more than a chart with an arrow pointing upwards.

Description

“Developing relationships, delivering results.” – these are the core missions of a consultant. But it’s about more than just the relationship between the consultant and the business. It’s about identifying connections between the business’ strengths, weaknesses and goals to achieve the desired future with the help of the consultant’s expertise. “The point is that business consultants are supposed to improve businesses: they are not hired to maintain the status quo but to change it.”[1] And that’s also the core mission of a content strategist. Content strategy means combining a business’ lifecycles concerning customers, products and content. These lifecycles and their sub-activities are interdependent, whereby decision making is just successful by considering one another. It’s about planning *acquisition activities* such as content marketing, social media marketing or direct marketing campaigns to attract new clients. It’s about *maintaining clients* by using content for customer support, training and knowledge base. And it’s about the *management and governance* of content.

All in all, Content Strategy can be seen as the umbrella strategy that includes every internal and external factor, which affects the business.

Meeting needs and solving problems.

A content strategist acts as a consultant regarding content, who analyses the needs of the business, users and operational team as well as the governance and budget in the first step. This is the main part to plan further steps. After that, content is collected, managed and delivered, which are the operative parts that carry out the plan and strategy.

To put it in a nutshell, a content strategist is planning the doing to meet a business need or solve a business problem. He/she is designing a repeatable system that supports content operations.

Content as a business benefit

Companies that see dealing with content as a necessary evil are usually not aware of the benefits that come with a good content strategy. Therefore, a content strategist has to point out business benefits that are enhanced by dealing with content appropriately. Such benefits would be the expansion into new markets through personalized content, building brand trust with more accurate, trustworthy content, managing risks with a better audit trail or increasing revenue. To make a client understand the whole spectrum of possibilities that come with a sound content strategy, he/she has to realize that content is more than just a text on a website, it’s everything from design to pictures to metadata and so on. Until they get that state of mind, there are a lot of consulting and guiding to be done.

A four-step methodology to a successful content strategy

Every project starts with a dialogue between business and the content strategist. More precisely, it starts with the question “What are you doing now now?” This marks the start of the *discovery-part*, the first phase of a four-step methodology towards a successful content strategy. The goal is to determine a status quo and see, where you have to put your finger on to achieve future goals. The second part is about analyzing the gap between your current state and the goal you wish to achieve. A *gap analysis* is about defining what remains to be done to reach the future state. Part three is all about *creating recommendations* by using the so-called “MoSCoW” model[2], where you define the musts, shoulds, coulds and woulds of your strategy. As soon as that is done, the fourth and last part is in line:

Creating a *road map that guides the client from the current state to the future one*. Having these steps in mind and putting it into practice is a big help to work in a structured and purposeful way.

Deliverables and Project Phases

There are diverse types of projects a content strategist can be tasked to complete. These vary in complexity and can be grouped into:

- Core Projects: Usually they have to do with existing markets and processes. They are single language projects deployed on a few channels and have no technical requirements.
- Complex Projects: These involve multiple markets and languages, new channels and delivery needs, but do not require new technology.
- Technical Projects: These might involve migrations, new feature or system implementations or add-ons to the other forms of project.

Similarly, there are several distinct deliverables. Deliverables can be the report at the end of the project or some different assets that are proof of the work done. The value is not in the deliverables (contrary to common interpretations) but in the work done in order to create them. Deliverables can be grouped in macro-categories and change as the project shifts from one phase to another. These categories are:

- Research: Examples of these are marketing research, customer journey, discovery interviews, …
- Analysis: Examples of these can be content briefs, requirement matrix, content inventory, …
- Design: Content matrix, metadata strategy, taxonomy, localization strategy, …
- Build: Content types, domain models, editorial style guides, …

The first two relate to the discovery, gap analysis, recommendation and roadmap phases, while the design and build categories have to do more with the operational aspects of the project, when the strategy is applied. While the number of potential deliverables can be immeasurable, not all deliverables are always needed for every project, though several core ones are generally needed.

Product content and complexity

When thinking about a website, most people will think about the marketing content, however, this is just a small proportion of the overall content of the website. Most of the content can be described as product content. These might be warranty information, terms and agreements, user manuals, tutorials, or any other content that is not related to marketing. This can apply to physical products, services, or hybrid versions, such as a subscription model, and when working on a content strategy it is necessary in order to keep this distinction into account and address both types of content. Another aspect that adds complexity to a project and must be accounted for, is the different channels a product is pushed on, and how each one might need specific content. UX writing is different from chat bot writing or technical writing. It is necessary to evaluate what diverse forms of content are needed for a given project.

My home is my content strategy

A content strategy is only useful when it is implemented. To create a content strategy is to design a repeatable system, this system is meant to support content operations in their deployment and iterations and should keep into account the main themes of operational models which generally consist in reducing inefficiencies, automating processes, enabling scaling up, monitoring and creating insights, and iterating again (explicit themes) and improving collaboration, automation, innovation and reducing risk (implicit themes). A useful metaphor for a content strategy is the construction of a home. Before the house can be lived in and “operated”, it has to be built, and before that, it must be planned and designed.

Content strategy deployment works similarly, with the strategy phase taking usually between 3-12 months, the implementation phase 6-24 months, and the operations phase many years. These phases closely match the planning, building and living phases of a house.

Content operations: The bridge between content strategy and content management

Content operations is a set of principles that results in methodologies intended to optimise production of content, and allow organisations to scale their operations, while ensuring high quality in a continuous delivery pipeline, to allow for the leveraging of content as business assets to meet intended goals. To make this possible a series of elements is needed. These are:

- Categorization
- Quality management
- Governance
- Change management
- Internal comms
- Monitoring and analytics

Content Operations influence and, in turn, are dependent on content management. Content management is comprised of several different topics, from domain models to content flows and types, to accessibility and inclusive design. The purpose of these topics is to help map the different content types and domains that the project needs, so that content can be optimized to be used across different channels and types while still being true to the context it is meant for. Content management includes the creation of content models and flows, to ensure that different forms of content can be aggregated and combined in a way that enables automated content processing, meets user needs and expectations and allows predictable delivery of content in sophisticated ways.

Let’s be honest: Were you aware of how crucial the role of a consultant is for a content strategist? If not, you’re like so many who are just venturing into the field of content strategy. And if this article did not reveal anything new for you, you are either an experienced content strategist, a lecturer at the FH Joanneum Graz or simply a genius. In this case, however, it is certainly never wrong to recall the content of this article from time to time.

Recommended reading

Bailie, R. A., & Urbina, N. (2012). Content Strategy: Connecting the Dots Between Business, Brand, and Benefits. XML Press.

Bailie, R. A. (2018, February 27). Why content strategists are the doctors of the content world. FH JOANNEUM. https://www.fh-joanneum.at/en/blog/why-content-strategists-are-the-doctors-of-the-content-world/

References

Content Inventories – Setting the base for a content audit

Course

Topics

Teachers

[Paula Lands]

Teaser

One cannot talk about *Content Audits* without mentioning Content Inventories. Without a properly established inventory a content audit is not possible, and the quality of the audit depends on the quality of the inventory. Paula Land explained in her lecture many dos and don’ts of content inventories, and she raised awareness for the close connections between the qualitative and the quantitative elements of a content audit.

Relevance

Content audits are one of the foundation laying parts of a content strategist’s work. They are always related to a qualitive goal: Can the existing content achieve what it should achieve? But before you can analyze and assess your content you must find out what content you have — an uncomfortable and unpopular task in many cases. A content inventory gives a structured overview of the content published or created by an organization. To set up a content inventory is one of the first skills a beginning content strategist must acquire.

Description

To create an effective content strategy, it is essential to be aware of the current state of content. A content audit is an enquiry to find out how your content is doing at the moment and where the opportunities for future improvement lie. In dealing with content the visitors and the organizations publishing the content pursue objectives. A content audit is an indispendable step to align content with those goals on an empirical base.

No content audit without a content inventory

A content Audit is a qualitative assessment of the content and its functionality. To audit content means basically to measure the quality of content with regard to desired actions. In this article we guide you through the **"content inventory"** as the most important part or the preparation of a content audit. We will also treat some other clarifications which are needed before the content audit can be carried out.

Before we get started, let’s clear up some main terms:

What is meant by content?

A piece of content is the information that is directed towards a customer or user. Content can appear and be published in many forms, such as headline, text body, video, images and through different channels. In our class we were digging deeper into digital content, presented on a website.

What is an inventory?

You might be familiar with the term *inventory* as you know that every supermarket needs to conduct it and that this is done either at a quarterly period or at the end of the year. At a specific time, supermarkets need to check on which products (WHAT) are located within their storage (WHERE) and further on to to which extent (HOW MANY) and what kind of quality.

What is a content inventory?

So if you think of your website as a supermarket, then for a Content Inventory you would need to look at every page and every piece of content that is found on your website, in order to later on qualify how good it is, determine gaps, detect room for improvement et cetera.

A content inventory is done as a preparation for a content audit, when:

- Content improvement is needed
- A content migration has to be prepared
- Content must be made fit for entering a new market
- Maintenance and optimisation is needed
- You review your content as a part of your business

Phase 1: Definition of the audit

Before starting a content audit some questions should be asked to define the purpose and the scope of the project. The answers to these questions are essential not only for the inventory but for the audit as a whole:

1. Why is a content audit happening?
2. What are the objectives of the organisation?
3. How to measure the success of the audit?

To be able to understand business goals the followings steps can be carried out:

1. Stakeholder Analysis: identify everyone who contributes to content including cross functional teams.
2. Assignment of measurable metrics to goals.
3. Prioritisation of musts and shoulds.
4. Listing long term and short term goals.
5. Definition of the addressees: Who does the organisation serve?
6. Definition of the most important user tasks and goals?
7. Definition of criteria for the successful information retrieval and fulfilment of user needs by the website

In order to understand the goals of the users you can proceed e.g. by

1. User Research
2. User Analytics
3. User Feedback
4. Developmemt of üersonas
5. Visualisation of customer journeys

Additionally an auditor should be aware of the:

- Resources and Budget

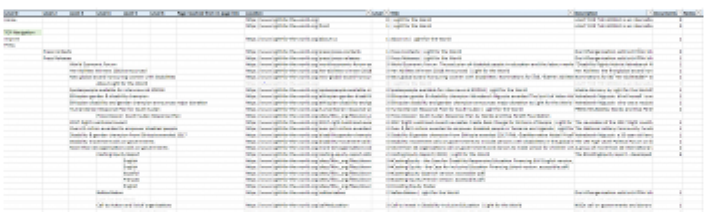
- Long term content strategy and planning
- Clear understanding of what an auditor will work with

Answering those questions are considered as the “define” section, afterwards “assess” section starts which consist of content inventory and audit.

Phase 2: The establishment of the inventory

To be able to do a comprehensive and full audit, a content inventory should be done which is usually a quantitive analyses of all pages of the website. (It can also comprise other content, e.g. social media content, PDFs and other media types and even printed material.)

A content inventory contains structured data, usually in the form of spreadsheet. How many and which data the inventory contains depends on the project definition. All website content inventories should comprise: URL, file type, media including videos and images, meta data, Word Count and H1 tag text. If a tool/software is used to create the inventory, it is suggested to start from the home page and to follow the navigational structure. It is essential to label every item of the inventory by an ID in addition to the URL to not get confused in the future when URLs change and to be able to sort the content easily.



Content Inventory SpreadSheet

There are 2 ways to create an inventory:

- **Manual inventorisation:** It provides detailed insights about the content, as the auditor collects piece by piece information about each content item. This way to proceed makes it easy to identify patterns. However as the webpage grows, manual ways to create an inventory become tedious and time-consuming. In many cases a manual inventory is restricted to relevant or representative parts of the content. Which and how many content items are inventorized manually depends on the goals that were set for the audit.

- **Automated inventorisation:** For an automated inventorisation all pages on a webpage are collected by a tool. Usually every item of a website is fetched via its URL. This approach is fast, comprehensive and detailed. However, the generated inventory only gathers data, unlikely manual work, it doesn’t create insights and it is not hands-on. In addition, automation will display a lot of information in an unstructured way. The most important tool for automated inventorisation are [ContentWRX Audit](), [Screaming Frog SEO Spider]() and [URL Profiler - Powerful Content and Back Link Auditor Software]().

Phase 3: Preparation of the qualitative audit

When the content inventory is ready, an auditor basically has the list of what s/he needs to audit in his hands. Voilà: the audit can start as you completed your inventory. Depending on the type of audit additional columns will be added to the inventory. Usually these columns have to be filled manually even if the inventory has been generated by software. By using the inventory as the base for the assessment of the content it is possible to achieve a much higher degree of reliability and independence from bias then by analysing only content items selected by chance or subjective preferences of the auditor.

Just a brief information for you to consider different types of content audits; qualitative (editorial) , competitive (best practices), brand, content performance, structural (functional), global, audience and social audit. This article will mainly focus on Qualitative Audit, Competitive Audit as well as Quantitative Analyses (Content Inventory).

- A **Qualitative Audit** analyses the effectiveness of content and how it performs for desired actions.
- The **Competitive Audit** is an audit type focused on best practices in the market by comparing audience, type and quantity of content, language format including tone and voice, community features, frequency of publication, overall impression and any other differentiating features across organisations.
- A **Brand Audit** mainly evaluates terminology, tone and voice, imagery and messaging. The main purpose is to evaluate how content delivers the brand messages and represents the organisation.
- A **Content Performance Audit** uses analytics data, site metrics, search data and customer feedback to see how content is performing towards quantitative business objectives.
- An **audience audit** elaborates how content meets with the users needs by focusing on user types, needs, tasks, flows, customer journey map, and gap analyses.
- The **structural (functional)** audit focuses on user interface and user experience. It identifies content elements, interactions, navigational models, templates and content types.
- The **global audit** analyse site for localisation efforts including language support, breadth of translation, cultural relevance, navigational model, imagery, design consistency, regional and local content and localised meta content.

Where to go from here

The inventory is the base for a content audit. As we have described it above it is closely related to the kind of audit you want to perform. In the recommended reading session below you find links to information about subsequent steps of audits. In our article on the first steps of a brand driven content strategy you can read more about brand audits.

Recommended reading

Paula Land's book on content audits[3] is still the most comprehensive introduction to the subject. It also provides comprehensive information about content inventories. You find a detailed review of the book here in this knowledge base: Content Audits and Inventories – A Handbook by Paula Land.

Paula Land's short article in The Language of Content Strategy[4] contains links to interesting texts from the early phase of content strategy, one of the first typical tools of which were content inventories.

Caveat (type: before authorization):

This article is a student-written report on the content of a part of the course Content audits in the 1st semester of the M.A. programs in content strategy. It reflects the understanding of the content from the students' point of view and may therefore contain interpretations that do not coincide with the views of the instructor.

References

Strategy is Dead. Long Lives Strategy.

5 November 2020

Course

Topics

Teachers

Teaser

What exactly is strategy? Why do we need it? How do we create a successful business strategy? And why do some say strategy is dead? Dieter Rappold explained at the beginning of his course Business Strategy for Digital Markets, why and how business strategy has totally changed in the digital space. The new landscapes of digital business strategy are the playground for relevant content strategies.

Relevance

Content strategy and business strategy are mutually dependent. Content strategies support business strategies, business in the digital space requires a strategic approach to all facets of content. To understand the operating space of their discipline content strategists need to understand what business strategy means today. Dieter Rappold explained it with the perspective of a reflecting digital entrepreneur.

Description

Let's talk about business. Have you ever asked yourself "Why the hack are they so damn successful?!" Here's the answer: Cause they got a great strategy - and are even better at executing. Oh, wait, let me just add this by the way: Strategy is dead. But without a strategy no business will be successful. Okay, before you get even more confused let's get started!

What is a strategy?

To answer this question, set your clock back. Back to the old greek. Because this is where the word "strategy" finds its origin. In warfare, where your goal was to survive. It means "the art to lead an army" beause this was the way to reach that goal. Somehow it is still slightly the same: "Strategy is the planned sustainable behavior of an organization to reach its goals." Okay, let's take this step by step.

The key formula is: Strategy = goal + path.

First you need a goal. A big business target you want to reach. Without a goal everyone understands, a strategy can not exist. Then you craft your strategy. because strategy is the path to reach this specific goal.

But: Strategy is not something theoretical written on a nice PowerPoint. That won't make your business successful. It won't even make it survive. Because: Execution is key! Execution rules! The plan itself is super important but following that plan is the key. You will not survive with no strategy but only if you're good at executing your strategy you will be successful.

"Strategy is dead": Strategy in a hypertransparent world

You perform your business in a paradox situation. Your business won't survive without a well executed strategy. Nevertheless strategy is dead. Why? Because we live in times of *hyper-transparency*. Not long ago businesses were able to do projects with large organizations where they learned important insights earlier than others and were able to use that early knowledge as an advantage as part of their strategy.

But today we live in hyper-transparency. Everybody knows about everything. And even the most powerful governments in the world can not keep things to themselves. Just remember Wikileaks. Or how fast media and especially social media is. You can not expect to know things others do not know. You do not have that advantage anymore.

So, do not expect to have the one and only strategy no one knows about. Those times have passed. All businesses have kind of the same strategy. And that is why strategy is dead. But remember: Execution is key.

Why do we need a strategy? Can't we just wing it?

The short answer is: No, you can't just improvise it.

Strategy helps us to find the best way possible to get from A to B. It answers basic, but essential questions like "Why do we do what we do?" "What do we do?" "When do we do it?" and "Where do we do it?".

Without strategy, we would not have a clear picture of everything that goes on in our company, nor would we have a foundation which we could reflect and base our decisions on.

A strategic framework not only helps with making decisions, but also serves as a guideline for the next actions that need to be taken. Without this quintessential foundation, our company would not work as one unit, resulting in little profits and success.

To make it even more clear let us look at this question: What would be the opposite of a strategic behavior? Well, of course *opportunistic behavior*. By this is meant that you have a goal and a plan how to reach that goal, but on your way you just stop and lose your strategic focus when an opportunity comes along. Sometimes those opportunities are really tempting, for example better cash flow or better marges. But they do not serve your big goal if they do not fit in with your strategy and do have the potential to ruin everything - worst case.

How do we create a business strategy? Isn't that, like, super hard to do?

So far, we have talked about what strategy exactly is, what hypertransparency means and what we need strategy for. But how do we actually create a goal-oriented business strategy?

Three questions that seem simple at first glance, are essential:

Why? What? How?

But before we answer these existential questions, let us look at the very beginning of the strategy process - the review. First and foremost, it is essential that a company reflects on itself from the ground up, analyzes its competitors and thus derives best practices.

By looking back at where a company comes from, an outlook should then be defined by the three points

- Motives,
- Output and
- Procedure.

Tip: What you should pay special attention to when creating a business strategy is: Keep it simple. Reduce complexity. Separate the relevant from the irrelevant so as not to lose sight of the focus and the goal.

And at this point we return to the three questions mentioned at the beginning.

- Why? - What is our motivation and our mission?
- What do we want to achieve?
- How do we reach our goals? Which measures do we need to take?

If this seems too abstract, here is an example from the real world:

Brand: Ferrari (sports-car manufacturer)

- Why (Motives): To be the best sports car manufacturer on the planet, representing Italy and inspiring people from all over the world
- What (Output): To be the most successful and best-known car manufacturer in motor sports, to dominate Formula 1 and produce top-class sports cars
- How: To embody and promote the greatest possible commitment to motor sports, Italian values and traditions within the company and to prioritize quality.

It is crucial that all company employees know the answers to these questions, share the same view and work towards the same goal. “A business strategy is a set of guiding principles that, when communicated and adopted in the organization, generates a desired pattern of decision making.”

– https://hbr.org/2007/09/demystifying-strategy-the-what

These statements are obviously not so easy to verify. Therefore, **strategic** goals should be defined and aimed for, which concretize the vision of the company and make it measurable.

SMART Goals and KPIs

Pull out your notepads (or rather your app on your smartphone where you enter all your notes and never look at them again), because here comes another tip: Strategic goals have to be SMART. Specific, measurable, attractive, realistic und time phased.

To measure our SMART goals for success, we need to define individual KPIs (Key Performance Indicators). In our example with Ferrari, these could be world championship titles in Formula 1 or increasing market share in the sports car sector by x%.

With this newly gained knowledge, the way to world domination (Edit: a successful business strategy) should be paved.

Just kidding, there is so much more to know about successfully running a business. Different leadership types for example. Or did you already hear about the principle of Unbundling?

Questions and Answers

Did you just think “Okay, I get that. But isn’t one of the most important things for entrepreneurs to identify opportunities and go for them?”. Great objection! You’re absolutely right! So, how to deal with that paradox? Well, the main question rather is: How can you integrate those fantastic opportunities that come along in your strategy? The answer is simple: Use your brain, human. Watch out. Stay flexible. But: Follow your strategy! Always keep in mind and ask yourself “Is this opportunity on my strategic path or do I have to change my strategy path to integrate that opportunity?”

Recommended Reading

The literature on the subject of strategy is hardly manageable. One of the most important authors is Harry Mintzberg, to whom the famous [5Ps for strategy][5ps-for_strategy] go back: plan, ploy. pattern, position and perspective. In the content strategy community, Kristina Halvorson, among others, has addressed the concept of strategy and the relationships between strategy and content strategy, e.g., in [What Is Strategy (and Why Should You Care)?][halvorson-on-strategy]. There is also a lot of literature about *hypertransparency* in the meantime; you can find some titles (except in the bibliography below) in the [COS-Bibliography][hyper-transparency-bibio].

References

cos [5ps-for_strategy]: http://courses.ce.metu.edu.tr/wp-content/uploads/sites/62/2017/10/Mintzberg-5Ps-for-Strategy.pdf “PDF des Artikels von Harry Mintzberg” [halvorson-on-strategy]: https://www.braintraffic.com/articles/what-is-strategy-and-why-should-you-care “What Is Strategy (and Why Should You Care)? - Brain Traffic” [hyper-transparency-bibio]: https://www.zotero.org/groups/383315/content_strategy_graz/search/hyper-transparency/everything “Stichwort-Suche zu *hyper-transparency* in der COS-Zotero-Bibliothek”

Startup Metrics

Teaser

Knowledge is power. To recognize success, a company must effectively measure and know where it stands in the market and what its long-term investments and goals are. Measuring with the appropriate metrics will help a company to make the right decisions for its short and long-term goals.

Course

"Stakeholder Analysis and Digital Business" taught by Dieter Rappold in the first Semester of the Master's degree course "Content Strategy" October and November 2020

Relevance

Startups are focused on very rapid growth. Successful startups are experimental and data-driven, and their metrics are closely related to the metrics for measuring the success of content. Startups and digital content live in the same digital ecosystems.

This lecture provides an introduction to startup metrics from the perspective of a digital entrepreneur, investor and consultant.

Teacher

Dieter Rappold

Description

The data driven approach

> "If you cannot measure it, you cannot improve it"

Metrics Matter
Metrics Matter

To define your organisation's success, you need to define the metrics you will be using. A metric gives meaning to measurement, and to find the right metrics you need to know what supports your company best. There is no one-size-fits-all-solution: Which metrics you chose depends on what business you support, and, speaking of content, which business problem you want to solve via content. Many successful organizations have developed their own, highly specific metrics. A lot of them are open and can be analyzed and compared via services like Baremetrics.

> “A data-based decision-making culture is the single most important competitive edge of start-ups against incumbents. But most startups are in love with their product and rather work on a “Product founder fit “ than a “Product-market fit”."

– Dieter Rappold, Founder, and CEO of Speedinvest Pirates

There are different main types of metrics. Often they are classified by the categories:

- Quality
- Quantity
- Efficiency

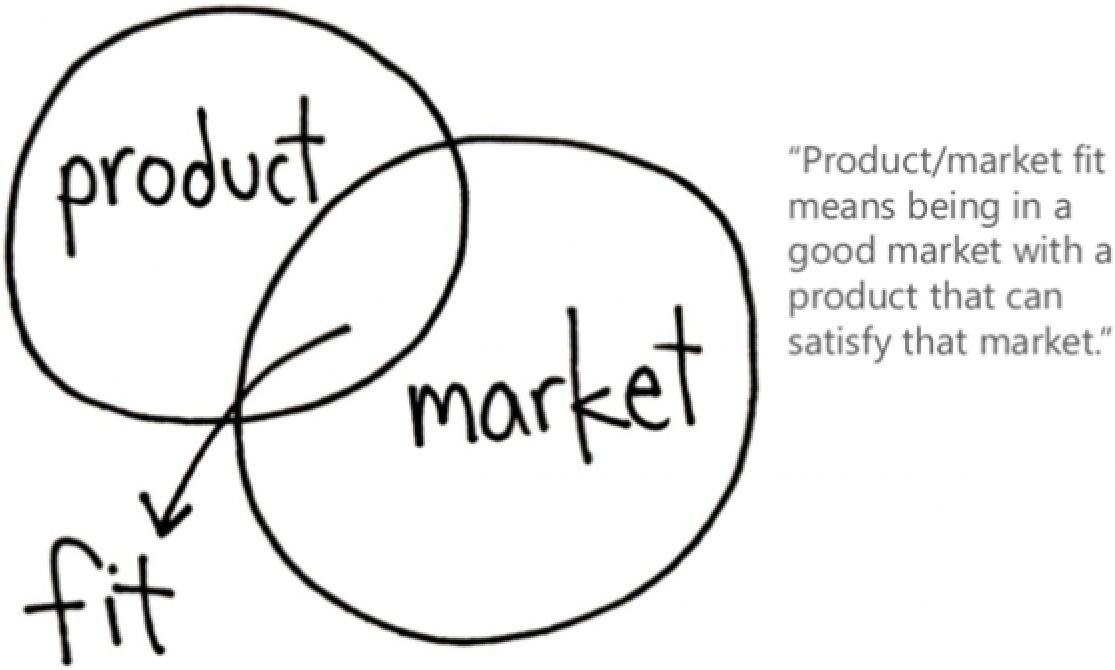
Proven metrics for start-ups, which can be used for a customized metrics strategy, are:

1. Customer Acquisition Cost[5] (CAC)
2. Retention[6]
3. Customer Churn Rate[7]
4. Customer Lifetime Value[8] (LTV)
5. Product Metabolism[9]
6. Viral coefficient[10]

The key question is: **When to apply which metrics?** To answer this question, it is crucial to differentiate between the different metrics, like input and output metrics. Output metrics reflect the results, and input metrics indicate actions. Above all, before you start you should base your decision on your data.

What to achieve by Metrics? Product Market Fit (PMF) as a condition for Sustainable Growth

The Product/Market Fit[11] (PMF) is no metric but it should guide a start-up’s analytics efforts as soon as product specific information from the market can be gathered. The Product/market fit is the degree to which a product satisfies strong market demand. Measuring the Product/market fit is the first step for a company to gather feedback from the market and to evaluate the customers’ interest in a specific products. The Product-Market Fit can be considered as one of the main orientation points of a start-up’s successful work.



PMF

To focus on the PMF metric helps us in:

- Respecting fundamentals such as a sustainable business model
- Striving for long-term profitability (and not growth at all cost)
- Showing how revenue ultimately surpasses costs (rather than making money straight away)

The cons of the MFP metric are manageable but still relevant:

- It is unclear what to track, when, and how
- Lack of focus on product-market fit

Find your personal North Star Metric (NSM)

North Star png

Whatever you are doing - you need a metric which gives you an orientation for all of your business, often called a North Star Metric[12]. It measure's your overall company success. Just as the North Star is needed to align the entire coordinate system of the sky, the North Star metric provides a reference point for all other metrics, and thus for all of an organization's actions.

Using the NSM Metric means finding the one metric that matters and your one metric that best captures the core value of the product and it also reflects your PMF. The NSM will often be an amalgam of several metrics. Since it should measures the overall quality of your endeavour it will be an output metric.

A North Star Metric is essential if a company wants to reach its maximum growth potential. To grow in long term, a company will need to develop a long-term growth strategy and for that, the 'North Star Metric' should be in this stratgy's center.

When defining your NSM the company needs to be aware that "revenue" is a bad choice. Revenue is what the customer pays in return for the product. To measure the sustainability of your project a north star metric is focused on the value the product brings to people. Having revenue as an NSM means the company doesn't have a clear long-term strategy.

The key reason, why a Company should have a North Star Metric or in other words the **pros:**

- **Orientation:** the NSM gives more orientation to the company itself, the core business, and the products which are sold
- **Core Value:** NSM captures the core value of the business and the company.
- **Focus:** The NSM provides a clear focus, and everyone has the same goal.
- **Clarity:** It is clear to everyone how and what the company is doing on a short- and long-term basis
- **Customer focus:** the first concern is bringing value to the customer
- **Growth:** efficient long-term growth as the company is more focused on value

The AARRR funnel - a proven combination of metrics

Did you hear about the AARRR[13] funnel? It's all about Acquisition, Activation, Retention, Referral, and Revenue.

The first A stands for *Acquisition*. At his stage of the funnel on organization has to find out where the customers are coming from and where there is enough space for the company to grow. A well known acquisition metric is *conversion rate* (CR): the percentage of visitors who perform a certain desired action.

The next A stands for Activation and is related to the client's personal first experience with the product. It depends on how customers feel about a product and the company behind it before they consume or use the product. At this stage metrics indicate the value of your product and how willing customers are to use and ultimately pay for it.

A well known activation metric is CAC – *Customer Acquisition Cost*. CAC shows the costs of convincing a potential customer to buy a product. This can be organic or paid. The difference can be explained by an example: When you go into a shop in town and buy something, this purchase is an organic acquisition for the shop. However, if you have been targeted by a flyer or other advertising, then it is a paid acquisition.

Let's move on to the R which stands for *Retention*: It indicates the quality of growth. And that means how many customers who have bought from the company once come back and how often. Often a differentiation is made here between:

- DAU = Daily Active Users
- WAU = weekly active users
- MAU = monthly active users

In digital sales, these figures are particularly important. Various marketing campaigns try to push the numbers up and to boost sales. Good retention metrics inform about the quality of growth, eg about the percentage of daily users who become monthly unsers.

The second R stands for *Referral Metrics* and expresses the willingness of customers to recommend a product to their peers. These metrics depend on definitions of e.g. customer loyality. Loyal customers, who always buy from the same company, the same brand, and/or the same product, are one of the most important assets for a company. Power users, brand lovers and super followers are especially loyal customers. To find out which value is decisive for them is important to estimate the Product Market Fit.

Revenue Metrics show last but not least how to increase revenue and how the company can push up sales figures and profits respectively. An important metric in this section of the funnel ist the *Customer Lifetime Value* (CLTV). The CLTV shows the net profit from one customer over the whole span of time he or she is in a connection with a company. If you are one of the brand lovers or super followers of a company, then you will be treated accordingly and can enjoy some goodies. However, if you're more like a casual shopper, then you're not going to get the benefits. For this reason, loyal customers are always more important to companies than new customers. Finding new customers is easier than finding loyal ones - similar to friendships!

It optimizes the business journey and set up some valuable and actionable metric goals for a company and especially for start-ups. For long-term growth, a start-up needs to have an attribution model, a bidding model, to know where the customers are coming from, and which measures to take. The Attribution model means to know better which of your spending is doing great and which not. The retention metrics show a company where new growth is possible. In saturated markets, it is hard to get new customers and to increase sales. For that, it is important to know, where market growth is possible and where new customers can be fetched.

Not only for start-ups the AARRR is important. Also, long-existing companies should have a look at the five most important metrics, because those metrics effectively measure the company's growth and are at the same time simple and actionable.

Presentation

<dieterrappold_cos20_ws2020_metricslecture.pdf>

Where to go from here

Startup metrics are a part of business analytics. The borders between business analytics and web and social media analytics are open. Many concepts and methods are used for both. Often, especially when content marketing is at stake, web and social media analytics *is* business analytics.

In our master’s program elements of this introductory lecture will be used in the courses on web and social media analytics and content marketing.

Recommended Reading

The Austrian company Speedinvest Pirates (disclosure: our lecturer Dieter Rappold ist on of its founders) offers a short and succinct guide to startup metrics for free: The ultimate guide to startup metrics[14]

Neil Patel, one of the most interesting and prolific authors in this field, gives an overview about some of the most important startup metrics in his blogpost 9 Metrics to Help You Make Wise Decisions about Your Start-Up[15]

Find more literature regarding some of the mentioned topics in the references! We have tried to find one important post or paper for each of the mysterious acronyms in the text.

References

Three building blocks of a brand driven content strategy: Message architecture - content audit - content types

Teaser

A brand-driven content strategy helps an organization to figure out and to convey its values and differentiators. It shapes the path for all future content decisions.

Boston-based content strategist Margot Bloomstein has developed, practiced and taught *brand driven content strategy* over a long period of time. In this lecture she presented and discussed the basics of her approach with a lot of examples from her own practice.

Relevance

Towards the end of the 90ies user orientation became an important motto in web development and web design (although not necessarily in the practice of companies). User orientation is often proclaimed as the most important guideline in content strategy. But if an organization is communicating only to meet user needs its business value may become unrecognizeable and its brand generic. The course “Brand Values & Message Architecture” focuses on the role and the needs of brands and on ways to solve brand related challenges through content strategy.

The lecturer Margot Bloomstein is a passionate content strategist with more than 20 years of experience in the field. Brand driven content strategy is the lense through which she looks at our discipline. “It is not the only one, but it is one right way”, Bloomstein explains.

Illustration

In her inimitable, always positive manner, Margot Bloomstein took the students by the hand, spoke about her own experiences and taught along the way how a brand driven content strategy can solve business problems.

Description

Margot Bloomsteing conceives the development of a brand driven content strategy as a 5 step process. The three fist steps are:

- the elaboration of a message architecture
- a brand oriented content audit
- the definition of the most appropriate content types.

Message architecture: from brand values to communication goals

The message architecture is the organizing principle of a brand oriented content strategy. By precisely carving out a message architecture an organization can define actionable communication objectives based on what is most important to it. A message architecture does not consist of the brand’s values themselves. It is a guide for external communication. It sets the direction of how an organization should communicate with its audience to get its message across. Since all businesses and organizations are dealing with constraints such as limited time or budget, the message architecture represents the most important communication goals in a prioritized order. “A message architecture is a hierarchy of communication goals; as a hierarchy, they’re attributes that appear in order of priority, typically in an outline.” Content Strategy at Work [16], p. 20)

As an example Margot Bloomstein showed the message architecture of a medical laboratory:

- Passionate about strategic discovery
    - creative, spirited, inspired
    - Visionary, innovative thought leader and industry leader
    - Flexible
- Tactical and hands-on

    - In the trenches, in touch
    - Detail-oriented and methodical
- Pioneering
    - Groundbreaking, trend-setting
    - Modern and savvy
- People-focused and market-driven
    - Trusted by medical professionals, researchers and media
    - Industry news source

Message architecture in practice

Margot Bloomstein showcased many real-life examples of how message architecture works in practice. She sparked up a discussion by asking which of these drinks contain the most caffeine:

None of the students in class would have guessed the correct answer: **Starbucks coffee**. Why? Bloomstein explains that the messaging shapes the character of a brand and how it is perceived. While Starbucks speaks more to professionals in suits, Red Bull focuses on the athlete type of consumer. The latter makes you believe that the drink gives you more energy, although that is in fact not true.

How to define a message architecture: introduction to the card sorting exercise

Margot Bloomstein's preferred tool for developing a message architecture is a sorting exercise with a a stack of brand cards. The stack consists of cards with around 100 possible brand attributes. Each attribute is printed on one card. The participants assign the cards to 3 different columns:

- Who we are not
- Who we are
- Who we'd like to be

The participants are free to add attributes which they miss. When all cards have been assigned to one of the columns, the pile of cards in the *who-we-are-not*-column gets tossed away. In a second round the participants try to discover the 3 or so most important attributes of their organization together with some accompanying or specifying secondary attributes. They have to decide what values (attributes) they want to leave behind – in most cases a difficult decision. But it is crucial to arrive at a small number of specific messages – otherwise it is impossible to use the messages for deciding what to communicate and what not. The identity of the organization would not be sufficiently defined. All attributes that the participants want to keep go into the pile of *who we'd like to be*. In the last step, the participants have to group similar attributes in word clouds and prioritize the attributes within each clouds. The result is a hierarchy of attributes which represent an organization's communication goals.

Annotation Card sorting is also used in information architecture e.g. for defining navigation menus for a website.

The physical interaction with the cards puts a special weight on the selected terms. It also encourages a conversation around topics and concepts. During the whole process, the content strategist is acting in the role of a consultant and facilitator. She/he steps back to show the group that it is their task and responsibility to do the work. In the end, the deliverables are merely the result of the work of the client.

What is a content audit?

The message architecture is also the foundation for a qualitative content audit. What content do we already have and is it any good? Does it align with the message architecture and the communication goals?

It is very rare that a content strategy can be started from scratch. That is why a content strategist must very carefully capture what is already there when he or she is going to lead a company on the rocky road of developing a strategy – before even writing the first word of copy or producing and curating illustrations.

A *brand driven qualitative content audit* has proven its worth here. In order to determine what should be continued, what is superfluous, and what is missing, the current status of an organization’s content is surveyed and evaluated with regard to its consistency with the message architecture. Margot Bloomstein underlines that there are different ways to audit content – but on each of them the content strategist should be guided by a specific motivation. A goal, a specific question, the message architecture – many things can be a reason to evaluate content, but it does not make sense to perform an audit ‘just because’.

Annotation: You find more information about content audits in the posts related to the COS course on content audits.

How to conduct a qualitative content audit

Initially, it is necessary to determine the scope of content to which the audit refers. For example: For a website content audit, a list of all the URLs can be put in a large spreadsheet (there are tools to do that). Next, the share of the different content formats should be evaluated. Are there a lot of PDFs on the web page? Are there many images (which is good)? Videos? Where are links set or is there duplicate content? Are there dead links?

After this rough overview the quality of the content can be determined. There are several ways to do this. The spreadsheet that has been created for the quantitative overview can be used as a base for evaluating the content piece by piece. An alternative procedure consists in following a customer journey through the existing website and checking if the customers’ needs are met or their questions are answered.

Doing the content audit means also to deal with constraints. In most cases, the restricted resources will only allow to examine a portion of the available content. If it is only possible to analyse a strategically important sample of the website it is crucial to correctly define the criteria for its choice.

A content audit is one of the key deliveries to the client. It is essential for defining the key elements of a content strategy. Without a qualitative audit, all subsequent recommendations for content will dangle in the air.

In class, Margot Bloomstein provides several different ‘doings’ to get her students to the topic. ‘Hands-on’ and ‘speak up’ is the overriding principle in each of her lectures

Finding appropriate channels and content types: a crucial step

Based on the content audit it is possible to recommend appropriate content types.

What is a content type?

In his online glossary for web content management[17] Deane Barker defines a content type as follows: “The specification of a logical type of content–for example, a News Article or a Blog Post.” A content type can be seen as declaration of a specific piece of content that defines requirements and possibilities. Content types belong to channels: A blog post can belong to the channel *web site* or LinkedIn, a howto post can be part of a company’s YouTube channel. Many business owners, CEO’s or even marketers are tempted to think that it it is enough to specify appropriate content as e.g. *video*. But only a video of a specific type in a specific channel will be appropriate for the message and and achieve its purpose. It is crucial to select content types which support the message architecture.

How to recommend appropriate content types

After having conducted the audit the content strategist can recommend content types and channels that fit the needs of the client. The selected content types represent the communication goals of the business, organization or company. Examples show how closely content types and communication goals are connected: If the communication goal is to be perceived as engaged and fun, is an annual report the right channel? Or are a blog, games and videos more appropriate? In other words, the chosen content types and channels will manifest the communication goals that have been defined in the message architecture.

Finding content types: A practical exercise

In class each of the 29 students has to recommend one or two content types based on the audit they conducted before. The challenge is that none of the recommended content types should be repeated. The first question to arise is: Are there enough content types for everyone?

Here is an excerpt from the ideas that the students presented (with a special thanks to Tamara Schiffer, COS20 student, for collecting the content types throughout the session):

- Social Media Wall
- Wizard for Covid19 Help
- Webinar with Q&A
- Case Study
- FAQ and Guide for customer support
- Quiz
- Travel blog post
- Checklist
- Notification
- Pricing-range for the shops listed

Before the exercise we fear a kind of Hunger Games: Will there be enough different content types and channels for everyone in the group? When speaking of content types, one first thinks of media types like video, images and long copy. But content types can be found in every corner. CoSchedule, a marketing organization software, published 113 content type ideas. Formats like quotes or references are often not even perceived as content types, but they have specific formal characteristics on which their efficiency depends. (The credibility of a content collection may depend on the correctness and the sources of quotes.) Furthermore this list shows clearly that suitable content types can also be found for smaller budgets. The necessary resources have to be considered by the content strategist when recommending content types to the client. In the process of aligning the content types with the message architecture internal resources like budget or personnel can get shifted and reallocated.

According to Bloomstein many (content) challenges can be met by a correct execution of the 3 steps: creating a message architecture, conducting an audit and recommending appropriate content types and channels. Deeper insights on Content modeling and editorial guidelines will be taught in specific lectures throughout the master degree of Content Strategy at FH Joanneum Graz.

> It has been really valuable that Margot shared her industry knowledge and helped us to apply them to our projects. I have already seen the positive results of her lectures in my professional life.

– Omer Sarica, COS20-Student

> The Brand Values class provided me with a very practical approach to creating brand-driven content strategies. Starting with the messaging architecture creation exercise, the content audit and the final assignment (which brought everything together), this class equipped me with a solid foundation. The class prompted students to think about problem solving for business goals and user needs through the lens of communication

goals and story-telling, using a logical step-by-step approach. Additionally, I particularly liked the instructor's proactive approach to encouraging student participation. It sparked some very interesting discussions around the topic.

– Azza El Arabi, COS20-Student

Where to go from here?

The COS program includes a separate course on content audits, which also discusses in detail other perspectives on audits and how they are handled technically. Content types are a subject of the courses introduction to content management and content-models.

Recommended Reading

In her first book[18], Margot Bloomstein described how she practices brand oriented content strategy based on many examples. She has also presented her concept in many presentations (e.g. Brand-driven Content Strategy: Developing a Message Architecture[19]) and videos (e.g. Promoting Your Brand[20]). In the meantime, she has further developed her concept and published the book Trustworthy: how the smartest brands beat cynicism and bridge the trust gap[21].

COS students have written about Margot's teaching in blogposts and portfolios. One of them: Brand-driven Content Strategy[22].

In the German-language content strategy community, our instructor Doris Eichmeier explores the relationships of brand communication and content strategy. In the book Die Content-Revolution im Unternehmen[23], she presents a brand-focused content audit she developed.

Some examples of the development of brand-oriented content strategies can be found by browsing through the COs-Master's Theses

References

Caveat (type: before authorization):

This article is a student-written report on the content of a part of the course Brand driven content strategy in the 1st semester of the M.A. program in content strategy. It reflects the understanding of the content from the students' point of view and may therefore contain interpretations that do not coincide with the views of the instructor.

Wireframes and the implementation of a CMS

Topics

course

Introduction to Content Management

Teachers

Teaser

Following the process of a wireframe analysis, this lecture report touches on some of the basic questions, concepts and insights presented in Deane Barker's class "Introduction to Content Management".

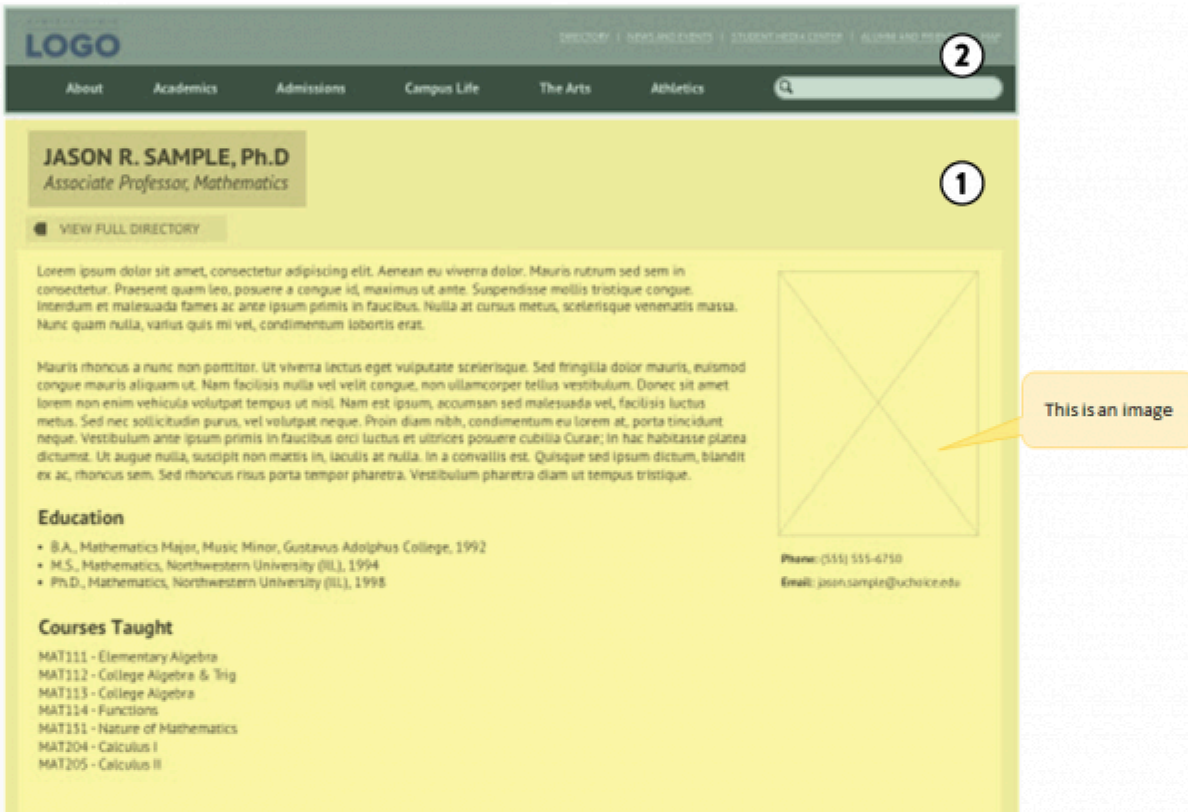
Relevance

Wireframes are visualisations of the elements which a website should have. They are one of the typical artifacts used during the implementation of a content management system. They are conceived e.g. by designers and content strategists. Together with annotations they inform the implementors of a content management system what should be realised. But it depends on the content management system and its customisation whether and how this realisation is possible.

In this report we use the analysis of a wireframe to introduce some key concepts of content management as explained by Deane Barker in his course and his writings. If content strategists and designers understand how the content objects and aggregations that a wireframe depicts are realised by a CMS, they understand the affordances and the limitations that CMSes impose on their work.

Description

Wireframes show different elements on a screen visually and functionally. During the development of a website they are often used to show what is going to be built into a Content Management System (CMS). Due to their versatility, they can be used in different fields like designing or developing for different reasons. Mostly there is one wireframe built for each content type.



What is a wireframe?

Wireframes are not just arrangements of text and pictures, so-called screen mockups. They focus on what a screen does, not what it looks like. They are showing graphically what is going to be built in the CMS, so each party involved will be on the same page and know what is going to be developed.

A Content Management System is a

> software system which automates the tasks around the management of content. A CMS assists editors in creating, organizing, controlling, securing, and ultimately delivering content. [@barkerWebContentManagement]

Wireframes usually show the core content of a page (the *content object*), and additional information assembled around the content object like categories, navigational information etc.e.

How is a wireframe used?

Wireframes are used differently by different people, depending on their respective roles in a web project. Many *designers* use wireframes for the visual design of user interfaces. *Developers* use them to understand functionalities and get an idea of the technical requirements needed. An *analyst* uses wireframes to show e.g. business rules. Wireframes visualize desired interaction and/or navigational paths. They serve to understand the functionality and the user interface of the screen-based end-product on the screen.

In his lecture Deane Barker showed us some good examples for wireframes. They can be easily understood when you've visited a bunch of websites: "1. A department subsite menu with a bunch of resources specific to that department explicitly placed in a hierarchy. 2. A blog with a group of blog posts ordered from latest to oldest. 3. A topic page about something with a bunch of disparate resources all related to that topic in order 4. of relevance as determined by a content retrieval algorithm. 5. A set of "related content" links under an article. 6. A list of the "Latest News" headlines on the home page."

– https://gadgetopia.com/post/8069/

When wireframes are used as base for the implementation of a CMS the annotations play a crucial role.They must contain the informations the implementators need. Every bit of functionality which is not related to content items must be described. Examples are the behaviour of images or the working of a search box. Questions have to be answered for every piece of content shown in the wireframes. Many of these questions concern the content objects, that means the content which is usually adressed by a URL: Blogposts, Staff biographies etc. Another set of questions regards the content assembled around these content objects. This content and the content object itself form what Deane Barker calls *aggregations* of content.

Content objects and content types

Usually the same wireframe type is used for instances of the same [content type](#) (like e.g. blogpost, news article, web shop entry) U

So, having discussed the framework, let us go into the details of what content is displayed where and how it ends up there. Before taking a closer look at the Operative Content Object, we will descend in the hierarchy of things, examine how the content we are seeing on the page is put in, modeled and presented.

But even before that, let us get to the core of the matter and clarify:

What is content? #

When looking at our wireframe of the page, and looking at our Operative Content Object, we see what appears to be a CV of a staff member, consisting of a name, a sub-line with title and department, the text, an image, some contact information and two lists listing the education and the courses taught.

Assuming that this is our content is true, but not of full accuracy: what we see is the assembly of content that has been modeled and rendered into this actual visible form.

The page displayed in our OCO is the rendering of a defined model of what a staff member page should consist of (and look like) that has been created in the CMS. This is an example of a content type. It could be called “staff member page”. All parts of that page (the name, title, department and so forth) are modeled content shown in its representations as well. These are the content attributes that are bundled in the content type.

Thus, the content itself, before modeled and represented, is data in raw form, that “comes to live” when transformed for the channels it is displayed in. Other than a website in our example, these can be social media posts, a PDF, an E-Mail, a text-message or physical media.

The raw data (that becomes the content) is put into the CMS by the editors. Types and models #

The content model defines what content types there are available, what attributes these types consist of, what datatype each attribute consists of (e.g. text, date, digit, email-adress, …) and which validations are used to secure that the right kind of data is inputted for each attribute.

So in our example, the content type could consist of these attributes:

● the name (that requests the datatype text and could be validated with an required input),

● the title (which should be kept optional in validation, and an edited list could be provided to choose from),

● the position (datatype: text or chosen from edited list provided, validation: required)

● the subject (datatype: text or chosen from edited list provided, validation: required)

● body text (datatype: text, validation: required)

● subheadline ‘education’ (datatype: chosen from edited list provided, validation: required)

● subheadline ‘courses taught (datatype: chosen from edited list provided, validation: required)

● portrait image (datatypes: jpg/png, validation: image format, size)

There are four more content objects on the page that are attributes in the content type, but that could draw their data not from the input provided by the editor but could be pulling the data from the organisation’s data base for example:

● list ‘education’

● list ‘courses taught’

● Email-adress

● Telephone number We are surrounded #

Having explained the Operative Content Model our wireframe has been built for to evaluate and design, let’s have a brief look on what else can be seen.

Aggregations

The surround, as introduced above, consists of a logo and two sets of menus.

When we look at a menu – and let’s focus on the main menu here – we see the names of sections (About, Academics, Admissions…), BUT – beyond the surface of information architecture, in the depths of content management – we are also looking at some sort of representation of the content structure. Menus are not the content itself, but are references to the content, and often are - unless “hardcoded” – a content aggregation. Dependent on the shape of content, aggregations can be put to use for generating a site’s navigation.

Content comes in different shapes. The most common three ones are serial, hierarchical and tabular. Serial content is organized – guess what – in a serial matter, and ordered by a parameter. Hierarchical content is organized into a tree, and content objects have an ancestral relation to each other. Tabular content is organized in a grid or “table” as we know it from spreadsheets.

So how content is organized within an CMS also determines the possibilities it can be displayed and represented in the chosen output channel. So an information designer and a person setting up a CMS will be looking at the same page from two very different angles.

Wireframes and the limits of a CMS

Basically a wireframe is made of the Operative Content Object and its surrounding that consists for example of a header, footer or sidebar (see a wireframe example image 1: yellow area (1) marks the Operative Content Object, green area (2) marks the surrounding).

Wireframe2 zones 01 “Once you’ve designed the basic layout (wireframe; note) for your article, you can load up the sidebars with all sorts of fun stuff – related links, today’s weather, promotional widgets for all sorts of stuff, etc.”

– https://gadgetopia.com/post/7114/

A common problem can be that most Content Management Systems have functions - like managing and displaying - for the Operative Content Object itself but not for the surrounding. The surrounding is related to the OCO through links for example but a direct association can be missing. You could solve this problem contextually:

“This means that each piece of content “lives” in some larger construct. It belongs to a “category” … or some other grouping that enables you to abstract the Surround away. So, you have some logical construct to which both (1) OCO, and (2) the surround gets assigned. This is where those two “meet” and are associated with each other.”

– https://gadgetopia.com/post/7114/

If you look at each piece of information in the surrounding and assign it to a bigger context you will get a wireframe with a solid basis. After you’ve created the wireframe you can start to plan your project.

Where to go from here

A lot of folks have had some experience with Content Management Systems or at least think they have a rough idea of what they are about. By doing this short run-through of a wireframe analysis we touched some of the core concepts and opened a couple of doors to the world of managing content. But these are only glimpses. Dean Barker’s lectures enter the depths of it’s modelling, aggregating, implementing, templating and migrating, aswell as editorial workflows and aquisition. And they are just an introduction.

Recommended reading

[Introduction to Content Management: Course Syllabus]

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HTML for Content Strategists: Why it is important to communicate with

programmers at eye level

Course

Topics

Teaser

Relevance

Description

Heinz Wittenbrink suggests in his lecture to get to grips with the basics of coding - content people need to understand how programming works at its core.

Black screens on which many small white, green, yellow or red characters flicker. Numbers, angle brackets, commas are displayed. For many, it is a big question mark what exactly programmers and software developers have in front of them when they are writing code. Most of the time it is shyness or perplexity that prevents one from asking more questions. Or one acts according to the motto: Don't saddle yourself with something you don't know what to do with anyway.

Yet the programming shortcuts in the background are the be-all and end-all of every website. Without programming, nothing works on the web. And even if people who publish texts and images on the internet rarely actually come into contact with the codes, for example the programming language HTML, it is worth taking a look at them, according one of first lectures of the course "Digital Publication Platforms".

Exchange ideas with technical staff

After all, part of the job profile of a content strategist is to commission and accompany the development of content management systems, to design applications or at least to supervise them and adapt them for one's own use. Often it is just a matter of making small adjustments. Especially then, one should be able to exchange ideas with the technicians and know which vocabulary is best to use. After all, you want to be understood with your wishes and goals.

At least that is the argument of Heinz Wittenbrink, long-time head of the [Master's programme in Content Strategy at the FH Joanneum] and currently a lecturer. In his lecture, he shows the most important basics of programming - and wants one thing above all: for the students to get to grips with it themselves. They are supposed to create a small website project themselves, which doesn't have to be so much about the content. But the website should contain what can be done with relatively little effort. Text, headlines, subtitles, pictures, captions, links to each other and links to external sites. A real structure. You can find plenty of suggestions on how best to get started on the web. But more on that later.

First, it is worth taking a look at Wittenbrink's curriculum vitae to understand how a content person can develop a passion for the web and publishing there. Wittenbrink started his early career in book publishing. As far as publishing on the internet is concerned, he is considered an early adopter. He experimented in this field as early as the 1990s and implemented his first projects. For example, in the conception of the encyclopaedic platform Wissen.de or in the development of a B2B portal in the field of electronic publishing for Bertelsmann.

At that time, there were neither ready-made online editorial systems nor simple, easy-to-understand instructions on how to proceed. Wittenbrink probably had to learn the basics of programming in order to do justice to his tasks. And he obviously recognised the added value in it: that good things can come about when content creators can exchange ideas with technicians on an equal footing.

Useful guides

Today, the web is full of guides that quickly teach you HTML. The page develpoper.mozilla.org recommended by Wittenbrink shows how a typical HTML page and an HTML element is structured, what the head and metadata is about. It also shows how to use HTML to break up a block of text into a structure of headings and paragraphs, add emphasis/importance to words, create lists, and more.

Why structuring the text is important is explainedon another page there: Users looking at a web page tend to scan quickly to find relevant content, often just reading the headings, to begin with. If they can't see anything useful within a few seconds, they'll likely get frustrated and go somewhere else.

Important for search engines

The role of search engines also weighs heavily and must be taken into account when coding HTML: Search engines indexing your page consider the contents of headings as important keywords for influencing the page's search rankings. Without headings, your page will perform poorly in terms of SEO (Search Engine Optimization).

German-language sources for self-study of the code also exist. The aim of selfhtml.org is to provide documentation on HTML and related technologies. It is intended to introduce beginners to the creation of websites in accordance with the current state of the art, but also to serve as a reliable reference work for advanced users and professionals. Clearly arranged in a wiki, those interested will find everything they are looking for on HTML. Hardly any question remains unanswered. You can work your way from one HTML term to the next via numerous links.

Very basic in design, but no less in-depth in content, is the site html.spec.whatwg.org, which is constantly updated.

And when you're through with the instructions? Then hopefully the following sentence by Wittenbrink applies: "You have to be able to understand the core of HTML".Then, he says, it is "no witchcraft" to control what may be the responsibility of other members of an organisation or company - to handle the technical stuff in the background. Because, as is often the case, you can't become an expert in everything. But a little control is always helpful and being able to have a say doesn't hurt anyway.

Where to go from here?

Recommended Reading

https://developer.mozilla.org/en-US/docs/Learn/HTML/Introduction_to_HTML

https://developer.mozilla.org/en-US/docs/Learn/HTML/Introduction_to_HTML/HTML_text_fundamentals

https://www.selfhtml.org/

https://html.spec.whatwg.org/

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