



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 unrecognizable 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](#)¹, 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 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 management² [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 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 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 book³, 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](#)⁴) and videos (e.g. [Promoting Your Brand](#)⁵). 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](#)⁶.

COS students have written about Margot's teaching in blogposts and portfolios. One of them: [Brand-driven Content Strategy](#)⁷.

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](#)⁸, 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](#)

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