GatherContent

Content Strategy for
Website Projects

by Liam King

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Who is this guide for?

We've written this for all the people that want to make smarter, content-led decisions on their web projects. If you're an agency working with clients on their website projects, or part of an in-house team working on your own website, this guide is for you.

It's for the UX and visual designers, content strategists, the business development and sales people, account managers, copywriters, project managers, and developers that all play their part in a successful web project.

UX and
Visual Design

Business dev
and sales

Copywriters
and Content
Strategists

Account
Managers and
Producers

Why bother going content-first on projects?

If websites are primarily a vehicle for content delivery, why do so many web projects still disproportionately focus on visual design and functionality, at the expense of the content?

When we treat content as an afterthought we limit our ability to make good design decisions and our sites fail to achieve their goals.

It is a constant challenge we've been wrestling with for years, as we try to push content to the heart of the design process and the users' experience.

This guide shares some of that experience and the practical techniques to help you emphasise content at each stage of a typical website project.

We hope it will inspire you to start thinking content-first for better results.

What we don't mean by 'content-first'

To be clear, we're not saying: wait until your client or your team has finished writing all their website content first before you start designing and building. That approach doesn't work and just creates a different set of problems.

We believe that considering and thinking about content at each stage of a project steers us to appropriate design decisions, which delivers better websites.

Mark Boulton said it best:

"There is a symbiotic relationship between content and design. One cannot thrive without the other."

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🐦 CLICK TO TWEET

"In the era of this-first and that-first thinking, I think we've always been leaning toward a content-first approach, even if we didn't use that term. Content first isn't copy first, any more than a "development-first" approach would imply the team immediately starts by coding. Rather, when we all approach a problem by first considering the content, we set ourselves up to wrestle with its purpose and communication goals. Does the new website need to convey a value proposition and empowered thought leadership? Then let it promote the biographies and podcasts of individual staff members. Does the magazine need to communicate our depth of research and commitment to unbiased science? Then let it form around articles that describe experiments and extensive trial and error. In either case, as writers, designers, and marketers, we come together around the content, first, to then plan our tactics. Our goals and their form drive the details and execution, as it should be."

MARGOT BLOOMSTEIN
Principal of Appropriate, Inc.

Chapter One

The business case for a content-first process

"If we can take the time to discover the possibilities and challenges of a project, then get stakeholders to agree and align on how the content can be leveraged as a real business asset, it's never time wasted. I've only seen it saving time. Crucial conversations build a knowledge base and efficiencies for design and development resources.

Margot Bloomstein liked to say "Paper's cheap. Photoshop is really expensive." Conversely, your client needs a plan that they can either budget for the content or scale their organization to execute on the best intentions of the design. They'll thank you for it later, and that's priceless."

SCOTT PIERCE
Senior Content Strategist, POP

Bad things happen when content isn't put first...

Have these common issues impacted the projects you work on?

› Has late content delayed the launch of a website?

› Have you over-designed sites that then became unsustainable after launch? Be honest.

› Have your carefully designed templates struggled once final content has been added? Was it too late to change things?

› Have you relied on designing templates with Lorem Ipsum because you didn't have real content to work with?

› Have last minute requirements caught everyone out?

› Have you wasted hours piecing together content from various sources to upload to the CMS?

"It's always challenging for our clients to risk an approach that might run counter to "how we've always done it" on the web or in a particular medium. But this isn't just a case that new problems need new solutions. Rather, the content-first mindset is nothing new and should feel very familiar from other activities and industries. No respected architect would plan out rooms without first considering the activities that will occur in those rooms. No caterer would lay out a buffet with serving platters without first planning the content of those dishes to determine the best style, form, and size for the job. In other disciplines, we consider content before format. That thinking makes sense in our industry as well."

MARGOT BLOOMSTEIN

Principal of Appropriate, Inc.

"In the past, so much of devising a content strategy was subjective. 'This is better, that's not as good', etc. But employ some analytics in your content audit and you can drive your suggestions and ideas home with real numbers from a client's real customer. If you come up against a brick wall when you suggest removing a page, showing clients the actual numbers can backup your suggestion and make your ideas a reality."

MAT MURRAY

Content Strategist, Delete

What's the 'BIG' problem?

We design and build websites with a controlled set of page templates for scalable and consistent sites they can quickly be added to. Makes sense.

But we've fallen into a bad habit of designing and building the template layouts first, and only then populating them with real content. Usually when time and budgets are already too exhausted to iterate and improve them.

If you take the time to understand your content's goals, target audience, format, source, structure, volume, frequency, quality, ownership …

… you will make smarter strategic, functional, user experience, visual design, and business decisions.

Example scenario: Balmain University's international student website

We'll use this fictional website redesign project throughout the guide for additional context, focusing on our pretend university's international student website.

It's been decided that a dedicated Latest News section on the new homepage is a must (the boss wants it, whether that's your client or your Director).

Rather than simply complying, you take five minutes to count the news items published on the current site over the year. There are only six published news items - hardly latest news.

So then you ask: "Why do you expect to be able to produce more news items on the new site? Will there be more staff resources to maintain it?"

An increased frequency of news can't be guaranteed, so you propose a flexible module on the homepage template that can feature different types of content including latest news items (if and when available).

With a little retrospection and common sense you have avoided unwittingly providing a poor(er) experience to the users, and damaging the project goals by failing to sustain content.

Make the case for putting content first

These points will help you to explain the benefits and convince your agency, colleagues and bosses:

› Reduce project rollout delays caused by underestimating the content production challenge (by thinking about content in good time)

› Don't waste time and budget designing and building functionality and templates that fail to handle real content

› Make smarter, content focussed design decisions for a better user experience 🐦

- › Delivering great and sustainable sites actually increases longer term success, builds trust, and wins repeat business (if applicable).
- › Folk are increasingly aware and expecting greater emphasis on content during a web project (it's no longer just about a new look and feel!)

How to validate your content ideas

Ideas can be cheap in a web project, but expensive to deliver. Get into the habit of asking these questions throughout your projects to challenge ideas:

Does this content idea directly support a user need and/or business goal?
Which user need or business need? Is this a priority? Is it the most effective way to support it?

Do the insights from the current site validate this content idea?
Could you/the client sustain this content on the original
 site? How much time has been previously dedicated? Did the content meet user needs? What is the evidence?

Have we validated this idea with real or proto-content?
Are we making our decisions on something more insightful than Lorem Ipsum? What do we learn from using the real thing or approximate proto-content?

Realistically, can the content idea be sustained long term?
Is it a sufficient priority? Is there already too much content? Do the team have the skills, especially for videos and animations? Will the

content producers still be around after launch to do it? Is there a budget for maintenance?

Is someone going to own this content beyond launch? Who?
Is there an ongoing subject matter expert (SME)? Have they been part of the process so far? Is the SME willing to be responsible for it? Has their name been captured in the site map doc for easy reference? Who has overall responsibility for the site's content?

Does this content idea introduce unnecessary responsibilities or risk?
Will this go out of date quickly? Are there any legal considerations? Is it difficult to maintain this content? Is it expensive to update this content (videos and animations for instance)?

Asking these sorts of probing questions as a project team raises the standard. You will treat content with respect, as the valuable and expensive asset it really is. 🐦

"The worst content idea we ever received in the middle of a project was this: start from scratch.

Yes, there are things to throw away, and probably most of it. However, there are core pieces of content, or at least one atom of an idea, everyone knows to be true, useful and desired. We can edit from the bare essence. Starting from a blank page is just death, as any creative can attest.

Get back to The Big Idea. What are the audience insights? What's going on in the landscape? What are they really good at? What does this even matter? Start there, and you can find, revise or build as much content as needed. Declaring content bankruptcy never gets you out of messaging debt."

SCOTT PIERCE
Senior Content Strategist, POP

Project sales process

It's time to sell in your content-first approach. Some clients or teams will expect nothing less and you've got an easy sell, but others may take some convincing.

Spot those that will value a content-first approach

Look out for these tell-tale signs during early conversations and project documents:

› Content has already been identified as an issue on the existing site

› Key content people are part of the initial project team and procurement process

› They will have already detailed content specific objectives for the new site

› They have a content heavy site that may have sprawled out of control

› Their site has multiple sources of content

› They have been burnt by content in previous web projects

People making these noises will be highly receptive to this approach.

But nobody seems interested…

Not all people will care about their content as much as you would like. Probably best to focus on the cold, hard business case that will resonate:

› The new site will cost less because we only design and build the templates you actually need for your content

› You get your new site quicker because we can get the designs right faster when we have real content to work with

› Your team won't be demoralised by struggling to produce all of the site's content in a big rush at the end of the project - you can spread the effort over a longer period

› Go live on time - working on the content early greatly reduces the risk of a delayed site launch 🐦 and the implications of missing the target

› Prioritising content that delivers your business goals and user needs means you don't waste time and money on unnecessary content

› Get a site you can realistically sustain so you don't risk reputation damage with outdated and irrelevant content

"Selling content strategy to clients who are working with tight deadlines and ever decreasing budgets is one of the toughest but most rewarding parts of the job. This is the time when you've got to lay it out in front of them. Highlight the benefits to their bottom line, the increased efficiency of their content workflow, the more engaged workforce, and the ability to put out better quality content for their customers, and you'll have them in full agreement."

MAT MURRAY
Content Strategist, Delete

Emphasise your content-first pedigree

Try to make these points during your early engagements:

"Our team..."

› Respect the effort and commitment to produce and sustain good content

› Audit current content to discover insights that will help us to design a site that better meets business goals and user needs

› Design templates around real or proto-content, rather than waiting until the end to see how well they handle real content 🐦

› Only design sites with ongoing content demands that can be sustained beyond launch with available resources and skills

› Offer guidance through the demanding content production stages to greatly reduce the risk of late content delaying the launch

› Ask you to start producing content earlier in the project to give you more time

Of course, the more case studies and client testimonials you have to back up your claims, the better!

Engagement phase

Most web projects have a short phase of engagement before the real project work begins. It is a time for the key project people to all meet and agree how things are going to run. It's also the perfect time to start talking about content.

Kick-off:
Content question checklist

These simple, direct questions at the start of your next web project will force you and your team to think content-first.

You can add these into a regular kick-off meeting agenda or handle as a separate call. It should only take 30 mins. It won't catch everything, but it is a good start.

Note: some questions are only relevant to redesign projects.

Do you know how much content you have on your current site?
Yes: Good start. You're already thinking about content and probably considering its impact on the project.
No: You need to answer that ASAP. This is a good opportunity to suggest a content audit.

Have you (or will you) audit the content on your current site?
Yes: Excellent. There is an understanding of the value of auditing content and the whole project will benefit from the insights. Get your hands on it.
No: Insist on performing an audit, even if it is just a sample audit. More about audits later.

Are you archiving old and poor quality content on your current site?

Yes: Great. The team respects content as a finite resource that has a life-cycle.

No: Warning. They may be assuming poor, old content will be migrated across to the new site.

Do you know who is going to (re)write all the content for the new site?

Yes: Good. Don't assume that improved content will magically appear in the new site. Ask who and assess their skill level and availability.

No: Failing to respect a significant project work stream and assuming the content can be easily migrated from the old site to the new is a big risk 🐦. Set expectations now and discuss the advantages of hiring a dedicated copywriter.

Does someone have overall responsibility for content quality during the project and beyond?

Yes: Good. There is someone with a lot riding on the new site and will be (in theory) working hard to produce good content. Start building a strong working relationship with them ASAP.

No: Alarm bells. If such a person does not exist and is not considered necessary, then the content beyond launch will be rudderless.

Do you know (roughly) how many hours per week will be dedicated to maintaining content on the new site?

Yes: Good. See the launch of the new site as the beginning and be more open to prioritising content that can be sustained.

No: Don't be short-sighted and unable to sustain the site. Discuss who could be responsible and how that could be funded.

Does the current site's content have dedicated (subject matter expert) owners?

Yes: Good. Those SMEs will need to be engaged during the project.

No: The SMEs may not value the site's content and will need to be (re) engaged to take ownership. This can take time and should not be left until you actually need to consult them.

Do you know if any content is syndicated from other systems?

Yes: Good. You need to know the content eco-system. Investigate that syndicated content ASAP so it doesn't catch you out.

No: Warning sign. Conduct a content ecosystem audit before you get caught out by a nasty, legacy content feed. More about mapping ecosystems later.

Will you have a (digital) content style guide?

Yes: Good. Content quality and consistency will be better.

No: Encourage the commission of a content style guide ASAP to help ensure consistent, quality content.

Meet the key content people

It's time to build a strong working relationship with the key content people. Include content people in the kick-off meeting so you get to meet them early on. 🐦 That may be a senior editor or a lead writer.

Chapter Four

Discovery phase

Content

	A	B	C	D
1	Ref.	Title	URL	Type
2	001	Home	/	Article page
3	002	Why choose…	/why-balmainuniversity	Article page
4	003	What students…	/student-experience	Article page
5	004	You career	/your-career	Article page
6	005	Facilities	/facili…	…age
7	006	Balmain…	/bal…	Articl…
8	007	Information…	/in…	Secto…
9	008	Office for the…	/o…	
10	009	Chancellor	/m…	Artic…
11	010	International…	/inter…	…ge
12	011	Overseas	/overseas	…vice
13	012	Courses	/courses	Article pag…

Whether you call it a research, immersion or a discovery phase, there are many potential activities you can include to help to put content-first in your projects.

Content audits

If you're redesigning a client's existing site then it is always worth taking time to audit the current content. ✈ It may be a bit dull, but by the end you and the team will have an accurate, insightful content inventory that will hugely benefit the rest of the project:

› What content types currently exist (and are likely to continue existing)?

› Where is content feeding in from (e.g. social network platforms, RSS feeds, APIs, other CMSs)

› Is some content out of your control and are there constraints around its accuracy, format, availability?

› How much content will the new navigation need to handle?

› Has the existing team been able to maintain what they already have?

› What content is or has been popular / unpopular?

You'll be surprised at what's hiding away!

"Get this wrong and it's going to make the rest of the project a nightmare. But get this right and it's the foundations for everything you do going forward. It's not an exciting or sexy job, and it can be very, very, time consuming, but once you know your client's content better than they do, that's the moment your content strategy can really go places."

MAT MURRAY
Content Strategist, Delete

A few things to remember...

The time and effort you can spend on an audit depends on budget and timeframes, and it may not be possible to conduct a full and comprehensive audit.

As a guide:

› Smaller sites (fewer than 400 pages) - full audit of all pages and assets

› Larger site (more than 400 pages) - audit a sample of pages and assets from each section at all levels

Always make sure you:

› Estimate size with the sitemap

  › Look for a sitemap page (usually linked in the site's footer) to quickly assess the number of pages, but remember some sitemaps only show pages to a certain depth and hide the real scale. You can use a site crawl tool to uncover those hidden pages and get a true understanding of the site's size.

› Assign an auditor who will be involved throughout

  › The temptation is to outsource this tedious task, but the valuable insight it generates should be kept within the project team if possible.

How to perform an audit

1. Download your content inventory template

Make a copy or download our content inventory [Google Sheet](#) and amend it to meet your needs.

Content inventories should be a working document that can be easily shared, accessed and collaborated on, 🐦 like a Google doc.

2. Capture the skeleton of the site

Build your inventory up in layers and start by capturing the structure of your pages:

› Start at the homepage (Level Zero)

› Capture the Level One sections such as 'About us', 'Our services', 'Help and support'- leave spare rows between them to populate later

Don't forget the pages that sit under the homepage that don't belong to a channel of the site, e.g. privacy policy, sitemap, accessibility statement, contact us.

3. Perform a detailed audit of each page

Click your way through a section's navigation page-by-page, to populate the inventory with minimum detail:

› Title - filename of the asset, e.g. helen-taylor-ceo.jpg

› URL - just the parts after your site's domain, e.g. /staff-profile/helen-taylor.html

Tip: assign a unique Ref ID number to each page for handy future reference.

Depending on the scale of the site and your available time, capture a combination of these quantitative and qualitative details to get more insights from the exercise:

Quantitative:

› Content type - article page, event, staff profile, product page, media release, FAQ...

› Files and media - PDFs, images, video...

› Functionality and forms - signup form, calculator widget, shopping cart...

› Owner of the page - if known

› Source of content - CMS, event booking system, stock management system...

› Sessions - refer to your analytics for the last 12 months

Qualitative

› Key messages - what is the page trying to convey? Are they doing it well?

› Accuracy - is it up to date, on message, factually correct? (you may need subject experts to answer this)

› Quality - does it follow writing for the web best practice, apply the voice and style guide, use user-centric language?

› Red flag - does the content need immediate attention because it is critically poor and damaging their reputation?

It can be difficult to evaluate accuracy and quality on sites with lots of pages. Fortunately, at this point you are looking for bigger patterns. If a page is clearly talking about something that is out of date, flag it. If it is terribly written, flag it.

> **Make your inventory work for you**
> Some auditors also assess how easy it is to find a page, when it was last updated, who its target audience is, and which business goals it is supporting. The point is: ask the questions that will give you the insights you need.

When to sample audit?

On a larger site you may find sections with recurring content such as old events, staff profile pages or news articles. Save time and record the number of items and sample audit a few to spot patterns.

4. Analyse and share the audit insights

Ask these sorts of questions to inform the rest of the project:

› How much content is there? More or less than expected?

› Did any "gotchas" emerge? Did you (re)discover content types and functionality that need to be preserved?

› What state of accuracy and quality is the content generally in (to migrate to the new site)? Does it all need heavily rewriting? Is the content coming from the sources you expected?

› What content did the current site struggle to sustain?

› What content was most popular / unpopular with users?

> **A team pursuit**
> The audit may be conducted by one or two people, but it must be shared and discussed with the wider project team to ensure its hard won lessons make everyone think content-first.

Map the content ecosystem

Audits are great for understanding a site, but a website's content rarely exists in isolation, which means you need to understand and design for the wider content context.

During a discovery phase it is worth taking a few hours to work with the key content people to begin to answer these questions:

› What are the main sources of content (on and off platform) that relate to the site?

› What content does the site currently syndicate from other sources?

› Is there any related and valuable, non-digital content (we could reuse or repurpose)?

› Who is responsible for each source of content?

All you need to get mapping is a big sheet of paper, a pack of post its and a few pens.

"You can put forward all the suggestions you want, but for clients to really see the benefits and feel comfortable that they can still find their content in its new guise, content mapping is an essential task. At Delete we use a combination of links to wireframes, InVision designs and content audit spreadsheets to make sure clients know where their content has gone (if it hasn't been chopped or removed, that is)."

MAT MURRAY
Content Strategist, Delete

No horribly complicated system diagram required

Keep it simple. Clearly capture the main sources and note if someone has direct control over the content or not. Annotate any interesting content types (if not obvious).

The activity is as important as the output because you are collectively exploring insights into the site's wider content context.
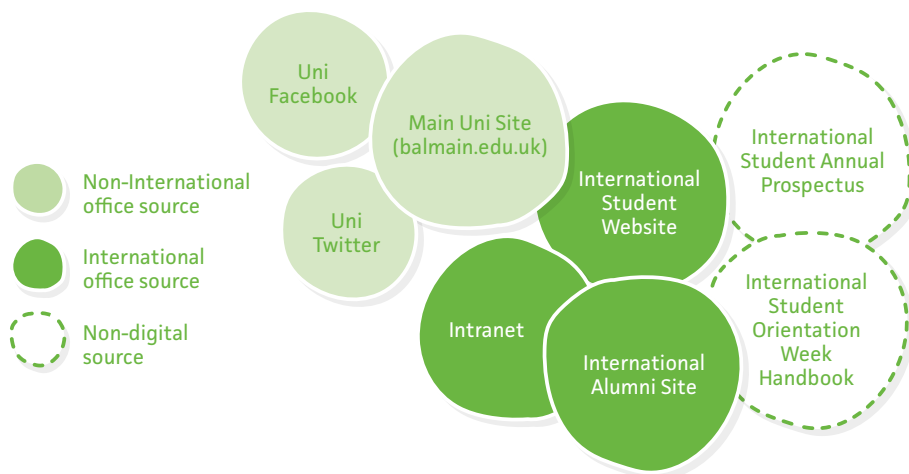
In our simplified University International Office example, we immediately start to see content opportunities with their annual prospectus (print and PDF).

A quick review of the prospectus confirms it is already full of unique, valuable and high-quality content (inc. photos).

Can the site reuse or repurpose any of the content from the current and future prospectuses?

Probably!

A content-first competitor analysis

There are content insights waiting to be learnt from previous redesign attempts by competitors too:

› What language and labels do they use? Is there a pattern across competitors?

› What are the primary communication messages (they have prioritised)?

› What content types and templates are they using?

› What content is unique to them and what is your equivalent?

› How much detail do they include?

› What content mediums are they using and how? Video, pictures, maps…?

› What content are they translating?

› What tone of voice do they use? Does it reinforce their brand?

Review direct and indirect competitors and capture your insights and analysis to share and discuss with the wider project team.

Back to our international student university example

You are thinking about including student testimonials on the new site. You take 10 minutes to learn how other university international office websites are approaching student testimonials:

› What content do they focus on (university life, academic excellence, job opportunities…)?

"One of the most common KPIs for a project is for a new website to be 'industry leading', but without a look at how the rest of the industry is delivering content to their users, you'll barely make a dent. Seek out the competitors, highlight their strengths as well as their weaknesses, and you'll find the gaps in the market to really set your client's content above and beyond anything that's been done before."

MAT MURRAY
Content Strategist, Delete

"Every discipline tends to look at competitors through their own lens. What are the design patterns? What about usability? What's the frameworks or performance? That's a shiny cool feature! It's not wrong. In fact, it's good to get the team thinking about how they would solve content challenges for a competitor. Knowing that makes it easier to focus on the content, but with an eye towards informing UX, design and development on the opportunities for your project.

If your personas and user journeys are handy, go through them to see what your audience needs along the way, and spot the gaps. Can it be discovered? Is it in the right format? Is it consistent? For the audience you're reaching, is the content just plain missing? These are all of the foundations of a good competitive analysis.

My favorite insight was from one competitive analysis that showed how similar the content was between everyone, and it was treated the same way as well. There was a lot of industry "me too" speak — serving nobody. That insight fired up the client and team to address the "sea of sameness" problem head-on."

SCOTT PIERCE
Senior Content Strategist, POP

› How many testimonials do they have?

› Which student groups do they feature?

› Are they written or spoken in the first person?

› How are they promoted around the site?

You come away with a bunch of insights about what does and doesn't work, ready to share with the project team.

Personas

Personas are a staple tool of user-centred design and a great way to uncover the users' content needs.

Whichever way you like to create personas, try to include these content specific questions for some juicy insights:

› What specific content does each persona need (to solve their problem)?

› What format do they prefer / expect / need?

› Where and how do they currently access that content (if even possible)?

› Why do they come to your client's site for it? Could they go elsewhere?

› How much detail do they expect / need?

Tip: best to validate your personas with user surveys and interviews that probe the same questions.

A review of the personas will then start to tell you:

› What content is most valuable and to which audiences (great for prioritisation)

› What format and presentation styles to consider, e.g. videos rather than text

› What angle or unique selling point does the content have over competitors

› What content do users need at different points in their journey

Proto-persona's recommended
If you don't know how to create personas, we recommend using proto-personas championed by the Lean UX community.

Proto-personas rapidly get to the heart of the users' problems and needs. They are intentionally rough and not meant to be an end result, but an activity that ushers the users to the centre of the design process.

"Audience segmentation and a thorough understanding of where the audience lives online is critical when it comes to devising a content strategy that works. If you know who your customers are, where they congregate online and what content they want to see at certain parts of the sales channel, you'll create content that actually serves a purpose and supports the needs of the end user."

MAT MURRAY
Content Strategist, Delete

"Have you ever been on projects where personas were the can kicked down the road? "We already have user profiles, or we're working on audience segments. Those were in the brief." Those are points of data and just points of data. What we really want is an artifact that expresses the empathy we can have with the audience we know, based on the data we have — something we can point to, challenge, understand and finally design to.

How can we ever build something our audience finds worthwhile if we don't even know what they want?"

SCOTT PIERCE
Senior Content Strategist, POP

Design and build phase
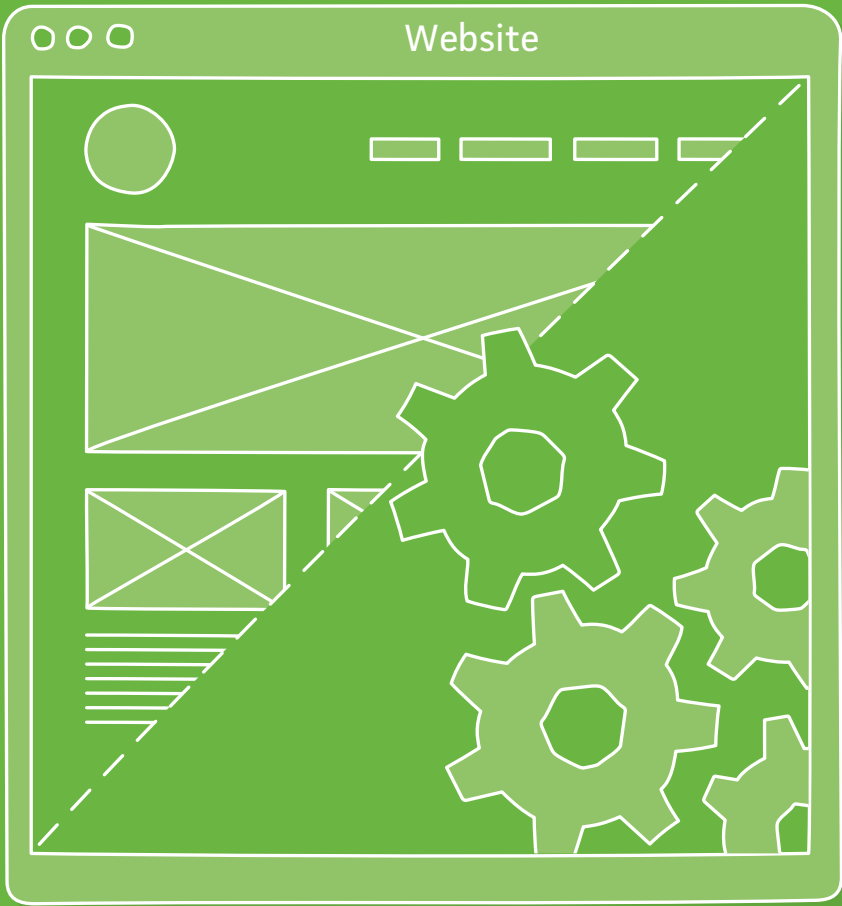
Website

There are several activities that will ensure you continue to put content-first in your website projects during this busy phase.

The design or the content: what comes first?

Is it the container or the stuff you want to put in the container? Tricky.

Simply asking a team to produce all of the content they want in their new site before working on the the web page template (containers) isn't smart. It is unlikely they will produce good quality content without the healthy constraints and parameters of defined content types and templates.

Alternatively, waiting until all the page templates have been designed and implemented before asking them to produce and upload their content into the site's CMS is flawed (for all the arguments we've made).

For the best results designers need to have a solid (if incomplete) understanding of the content and structure, and the content people need to know what constraints they are producing the content within. That means design, functionality and content are developed simultaneously.

Throughout this phase, content will need to be edited and template designs and structures will be adjusted to find that sweet spot. This is a healthy and mature way to run a web project.

Design with proto-content

Stuffing Lorem Ipsum into wireframes and prototypes is not a content-first approach. It is the opposite because it is inert, meaningless, lacks context and structure, revealing very little about the relationship between the design and the content.

In the absence of signed off content, there is still a better way: proto-content.

We don't need perfect content to design and validate our imperfect prototypes, but we do need something better than gibberish.

Fortunately, there are several realistic options for UX and visual designers to make smarter design decisions early:

Back to our University example

You are working on the UX design for upcoming international student events which will be promoted on the homepage.

Nothing too special on first inspection: each event will have a title, a summary extract, time details, location details, etc.

But you take five minutes to write some realistic proto-content for your wireframes for the upcoming event panels on the new homepage:

Upcomng events
Event title

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit, sed do eiusmod tempor incididunt ut labore et dolore magna aliqua. Ut enim ad minim veniam, quis nostrud exercitation ullamco laboris nisi ut aliquip ex ea commodo consequat.

Time | Date

Upcomng events
International student networking evening

The University's international students are coming to an evening of networking opportunities with other students and professionals from various leading UK and international companies, it will be excellent fun.

Great Hall
7pm-9pm, Thurs 10 April 2014

Upcomng events
Balmain University International Student Careers Fair 2014

The University's annual international students fair is back with over 100 representatives from leading UK and international companies plus talks and clinics to help you find the perfect job.

The Charles Darwin Centre
Westgate Campus
9am-5pm, Thurs 10 April
– Friday 11 April 2014

Example 1 (left) – no real content, placeholder Lorem text
Example 2 (middle) – real content, typical case
Example 3 (right) – real content, edge case

The proto-content (examples 2&3) immediately reveals important insights that you don't get from the Lorem Ipsum example:

› Showing the building and campus name is long – perhaps just show the campus and reveal the building on the actual event profile page?

› How to best handle multi-day events? Could get tricky!

› Promo panels need to handle reasonably long titles of 7+ words – does that mean having less homepage panels, but with more space?

› The extracts of 30~ words might be overkill for a promo panel, is the title enough?

› What is the best date and time format to use?

› Do you feature upcoming events on the homepage that have already started but haven't ended?

Because you have caught these insights early you can immediately iterate on your design, rather than realising when it is too late to easily change the built template.

Design with the current site content

Even if it is outdated, it is still more meaningful than Lorem Ipsum. Get copying and pasting existing content into your emerging wireframes.

You can always update it with new content as it appears during the project.

Design with competitor content

Copy and paste relevant, quick-win, proto-content from comparable sites. You will reflect on how they have designed for similar scenarios.

Write your own throw-away content

You don't need to be an amazing copywriter to produce content you can start designing with 🐦 and for. You're not aiming for perfection, the skilled copywriter will worry about that later. You're aiming for insights and validation.

It obviously takes longer to write a few paragraphs of content than dump and prune a block of Lorem Ipsum, but the insights and validation far outweigh the effort.

Use draft content (don't wait for sign off)

Get copying and pasting new sample content into your prototypes as soon as the writers start drafting it. There is no need to wait for final, signed-off versions to start validating your design decisions.

Draft content is simply an early iteration of what will eventually be reviewed, revised and signed off as it works through the editorial workflow. It won't be wildly different from the final version, so make use of it early.

Commission sample content

If the writers are ready to go, ask them to draft sample content for the templates you are about to design. Give them some guidance and constraints about what you expect them to include by sharing any early template sketches and content models.

A word of caution!
Using non-signed off content in your work has its risks. Teams can be forgiven for presuming you expect to launch with it when they are asked to review designs.

And test content has a nasty habit of finding its way into the final site at launch which can be embarrassing at best. These tips will help:

› Always be clear in presentations and review sessions that the content they are looking at is not the final, signed off version

› Clearly and consistently label any non-signed off content on a page to avoid any confusion

› Use a consistent prefix on page titles in the CMS to easily filter for them

› Have a plan for removing non-signed off content before launch - some teams use a fresh database once they are ready to populate the site with signed off content

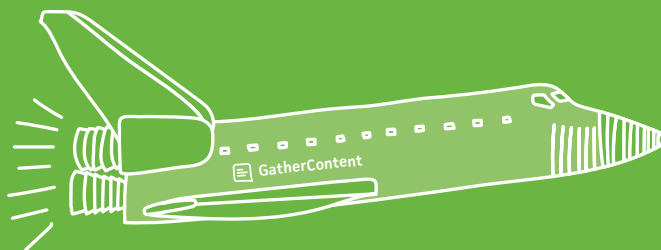› Contain and use non-signed off content sparingly to reduce the chance of it slipping through the net

Content Production Planning

Our previous guide has all the advice you need to produce quality content on time for a website project.

Chapter Six
Post Launch

Launching a new website is the start not the end ✈ - it is simply "Day 1". Many websites deteriorate from this point because there is no plan for life beyond the project, and content is usually the first thing to let users down. Talk about governance early in the project so everyone knows the long-term plan.

Content governance planning

To ensure the site gets better over time, design and implement a content governance plan. You should certainly know by this point who the content champions are (maybe it's you!), and they will be critical to its execution.

A plan should be a short, working document that clearly answers these questions:

› Who is responsible for the maintenance of the site's content (at a page-by-page level)?

› What are the process and timelines for reviewing and revising content?

› What is the workflow for new content?

› What is the criteria and process for archiving content?

› Who is responsible for evaluating the content KPIs?

› What content is high risk?

› What content is likely to go out of date?

› What training and support is required for site contributors (to keep up quality)?

"Good governance isn't just good policies and more knobs. It's making sure there's a better author experiences and purpose to the work."

SCOTT PIERCE
Senior Content Strategist, POP

"Selecting a new CMS platform, designing a new author journey or producing a new content workflow can be a lot for clients to get their heads around, and without a comprehensive governance playbook, it simply won't work. Let them in to this new way of thinking, a new way to work with refined tools and workflows with governance that educates and informs in equal measure."
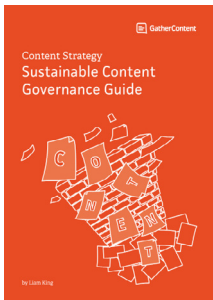
MAT MURRAY
Content Strategist, Delete

The KPIs for evaluating content performance should be included or linked from the plan for quick reference.

A good content governance plan should:

› Have a dedicated owner responsible for its implementation

› Be distributed and be easy to access by all content stakeholders

Content Strategy: Sustainable Content Governance Guide

How to to take control of your content and manage it effectively post-launch

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› Be reviewed and updated on a regular basis
› Be referenced in the job descriptions of content owners and stakeholders

Design for sustainable content

The best way to maintain content is to take a content-first approach ✈ throughout the earlier stages. Reflecting on what content is realistic, feasible and sustainable for the team's skills, resources and priorities will greatly reduce the ongoing content challenge.

To ensure a site gets better over time, you need to design and implement a content governance plan

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An interview with

Kristina Halvorson

What advice do you have for new content strategists forging the way for content strategy within their organisations?

It's really important that you push towards people's pain points within the organisation. If people are always running out of budget during the content phase or if clients keep pushing back and you keep running into a wall during the IA phase for example. If the agency knows content is a problem and the client says it is not ... all of these things can be addressed by bringing a content strategist to the table to help people really understand the scope of the challenge, the breadth of issues and to dig up unanswered questions.

That's the first thing to do. Content strategy may be the right thing

they care about selling, they care about establishing long term relationships with clients.

Start inviting yourself to meetings. The earliest you can get involved and ask questions, the better integrated your content strategist role will be within the organisation's process.

How can people get content strategy bought in by stakeholders and how do you start the conversation?

Pick a pain point. Pick one thing, a hot topic. Then go away and figure out how content strategy can solve it. If you focus on this is what content strategy is and here's how you do it, it's too general. The way to get at it is to pick one thing then bring content strategy know-how to the table. Don't ask if you can do it, just do it. Then hopefully you can establish one win and you'll have the ear of leadership to discuss what else you could tackle or solve with additional resource.

If you go after everything at once, it probably won't happen.

What advice would you give an in-house content strategist whose company thinks content strategy is a fancy way of saying copywriting?

Not all copywriters are strategic thinkers and not all content strategists are copywriters. Ultimately there is an opportunity for copywriters to come to the table asking big questions about why they we putting copy on the page here, why aren't they prioritising things here and so on. That's good editorial.

One of the big powers of content strategy is asking the right

tions to get the right answers to make smarter decisions early, versus coming in saying this is a problem, what can we do to fix it. It's all about the questions and learning to be a better consultant.

How do you keep clients engaged when they're struggling to create content alongside their day job?

When dealing with stakeholders that you expect content from and they have a full time job that isn't producing content, work hard to give them tools to make it as easy as possible to create the content. Make sure they are clear on the objective of the content and who the key audience is. Give them guidelines and tips so at least they aren't staring at a blank page and the more you can hold their hand, the better.

What kind of document do you create to communicate content needs to the development team?

You need to sit with the dev team early on to find out what opportunities there are for content within the CMS. Also, what constraints. The process here isn't that different to the UX process. You get content requirements in place as early as possible such as if you're dealing with structured content and/or components. The documentation you provide will depend on what the developers are used to working with and what questions they want answered.

Say to them, in the past when the time has come to input/build content, what questions do you have, what do you end up doing to fill in the gaps? Build the documentation around that to ensure they get what they need.

Communicate what you need too like the sitemap, metadata

ma, page tables. Whatever document you do create for them, make sure it speaks their language. Create documentation they can use and find useful.

What tips and tools can you recommend to audit existing site?

You need to understand why you are doing an audit in the first place. Is it to archive a bunch of stuff or because the internal search engine isn't working as there is no standard tagging and metadata.

Then you can do a qualitative audit, a quantitative audit or both. For quantitative I recommend the Content Analysis Tool (CAT). It will leave you with an inventory of the site that you can then attach additional quantitative data too.

For a qualitative audit, you can't do that until you have specific guidelines in place informed by your strategy. Understand what is needed, why, the role the content is playing for the user, does it map back to the strategy and to the user journey, is it on brand? Then dig into the substance of the content.

What's the best way to debrief after a web design project?

At Brain Traffic we do post-mortems after each project. We discuss what the poor outcomes were and ask how did it map to the original goals. Also, what worked? The key is to get everyone in the same room and have a solid facilitator.

If you can debrief with your client, that's even better but can be more difficult. Ask for 20 minutes of their time and ask the same specific questions.

How can we ensure teams think beyond the big relaunch and consider ongoing content and governance needs?

You have to ask them about it so they think about it. If they want to update their homepage carousel weekly, ask them who is going to do that, who will be involved and what is the process? Let them know that you want to help them beyond launch.

Thanks for reading!

We hope you can take something away from this guide to apply to your own process.

Asking simple questions, at the right time, will ensure content is at the heart of the design process and the eventual user experience.

So, good luck closing and delivering plenty of content-first projects.

About the author

Liam King

Liam is Founder of Lagom Strategy, a UK consultancy specialising in UX and sustainable content strategy.

With over a decade of content production and strategy experience in the UK and Australia, Liam has built up a wealth of practical knowledge on how to put content back at the heart of web projects.

Liam was previously Senior UX Architect / Content Strategist with Sydney agency, Digital Eskimo, where he introduced and led the agency's successful content strategy services. Before heading to Australia in 2009, Liam was a Web Producer at the UK Parliament and the Senior Web Editor at the UK Foreign Office.

Liam also has a Masters degree in Web Journalism.

SCOTT PIERCE

Senior Content Strategist, POP

With a background in story editing for television, Scott's consulted brands for over a decade on how they can analyze and plan for the creation, delivery, and governance of useful, usable content. Some highlights from client and agency-side include Toyota, Microsoft, and Disney. After Razorfish and Dentsu, Scott joined POP in 2010 to work with a diverse roster such as The Pokémon Company International, Signature Theatre, and Target – most notably on the Webby award-winning redesign of their corporate website. Outside of POP, he serves as founding co-organizer of Content Strategy Seattle, connecting ideas with other strategists, designers and developers.

MAT MURRAY

Content Strategist, Delete

Mat is a content strategist at Delete; a digital agency based in London, Leeds and Munich that has been creating digital experiences since 2000. You can connect with him on LinkedIn, or better still, say hello on Twitter, which is where you'll find him talking tech, video games and the limited beta release of the some hot social app you've never heard of.

MARGOT BLOOMSTEIN
Principal of Appropriate, Inc.

Margot Bloomstein is the principal of Appropriate, Inc., a brand and content strategy consultancy, and the author of Content Strategy at Work: Real-World Stories to Strengthen Every Interactive Engagement. She helps companies create brand-appropriate user experiences to engage their audiences with consistency and clarity.

Over the past 15 years, she's helped companies as a creative director, content strategist, and user experience design consultant. She helped shape corporate social responsibility efforts at Timberland, alumni relations at Tufts University, and cultural tourism strategy for the state of Nevada. Her clients also include Lovehoney, Lindt and Sprüngli, Delhaize, Harvard, and Sallie Mae. A SXSW featured speaker, Margot speaks internationally on topics in user experience design and content strategy. Recent engagements include Confab Central, HOW Interactive Design Conference, UX Lisbon, CS Forum Frankfurt, Confab, and Web 2.0. She tweets prolifically at @ mbloomstein.

KRISTINA HALVORSON
CEO and founder of Brain Traffic

Kristina Halvorson is the CEO and founder of Brain Traffic, a world-renowned content strategy consultancy. Published in 2009, Kristina's book Content Strategy for the Web (1st edition) was, at the time, the only book published on the topic. Today, Content Strategy for the Web is considered the "gold standard" for content strategy literature and is credited with creating the foundation for what is now a rapidly-evolving industry.

Kristina is the founder of Confab, the first U.S. conference dedicated to the topic of content strategy. Onstage, Kristina is a celebrated speaker, well-known for her humorous, practical, and inspiring talks. She has appeared at over 50 conference.

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