2 PROBLEM

GREAT CONTENT MEETS USERS' NEEDS and supports key business objectives. It engages and informs. It's well-written and intuitively organized. It keeps people coming back for more. But when content sucks—when it's overwritten, redundant, hard to find, irrelevant—people come, look, and leave. And, sometimes, they never come back. Most of the content we find online is simply in the way—even outdated or straight-up inaccurate. It's not doing what we need it to do. And somehow, we can't seem to get it fixed. It's always the elephant in the room, the one thing no one really wants to talk about. And man, that is one ugly elephant.

So whose fault is this content crisis, anyway? And who's going to clean up this mess?

NO FINGER-POINTING ALLOWED

It's very unlikely that your content challenges are caused by a single person or department. Content is a complex, hairy beast that depends on myriad people, technologies, and processes. When you can find a shared language to discuss your content challenges, you'll be better able to collaborate with your colleagues and identify solutions.

In this chapter, we'll look at some of the most common obstacles that keep us from turning bad content into better content:

- We treat content like a commodity.
- We don't have time to make a plan.

- We make deadly assumptions.
- Content is political.
- It's all too much, and we'll never move forward.

And now, let's take a few pages to bond together about our frustrations, hopes, and fears. You are not alone. It's time for content therapy.
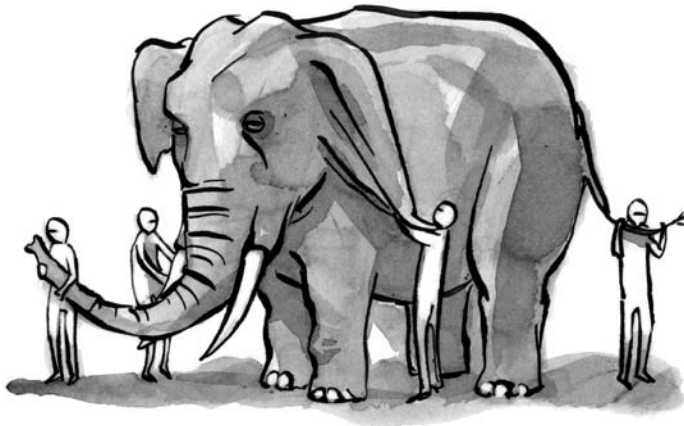
How do you eat the elephant in the room?

WE TREAT CONTENT LIKE A COMMODITY

Delivering great content requires some kind of investment: user research, strategic planning, meaningful metadata, web writing skills, and editorial oversight. It requires real people and real resources to get it right, and it's not easy. That's why so many of our organizations are constantly looking for shortcuts to getting the content done. When we take that attitude, we start to see content as piles and piles of *stuff* that can be acquired at will. Here are some examples.

LET'S GO GET SOME CONTENT

To some, automatic aggregation of content (via RSS feeds or back-end algorithms) seems like a smart, painless alternative to the complicated, time-intensive, ongoing content creation process.

Similarly, the idea that we can pay to publish syndicated content under our own brand umbrella is wholly appealing. Sign on the dotted line, and fresh content will be delivered daily to your customers, courtesy of Custom Publisher Number Nine.

These aren't inherently bad ideas. In fact, working with content that's produced outside of your organization might be the right decision. But don't mistake these tactics as your answers to a long-term content strategy. Quality, relevant content can't be spotted by an algorithm. You can't just license it and then walk away. You need people to create or curate it.

LET'S PUBLISH AS MUCH CONTENT AS WE POSSIBLY CAN

There was once a client who was very interested in producing massive amounts of content on his website. His idea was that the more content he had:

- The better his search engine rankings would be
- The more value he would provide to his online audiences
- The more chance he had of creating "competitive differentiation" in his industry

Yes, content can do a lot. However, the website this client was hell-bent on creating would incur much greater costs than he could ever anticipate—in time, money, brand value, and customer satisfaction.

The more content you have, the harder it is to keep up with: it ages quickly, breaks our navigation systems, and starts piling up in ways we never expected. Suddenly, we find our users are struggling to complete the tasks they came to do—gather information, make a decision, get help, share relevant content with friends. A user doesn't want endless options. He wants the content he needs, when and where he needs it.

LET'S GET USERS TO GENERATE THE CONTENT FOR US

Although "user-generated content" may sound like "content you don't have to create," unfortunately there's a catch: You can't always depend on your audience to deliver the goods.

Let's say you own a technology company, and you're looking for ways to save money on phone-based customer support. Your website support section has been sorely neglected for years. You decide to launch a forum so that your customers can help solve each other's problems—a low-cost and, you believe, low-maintenance solution.

The forum launches. A few customers show up and pose questions. Other customers don't answer the questions, so your intern does. More questions trickle in. But with so few posts, and so few visitors, the forum feels like an empty restaurant, or a lame party that no one attended. Within a few months, the "last post" dates are looking old and tired. And your phone support costs haven't decreased by a cent.

What went wrong? Beyond the forum launch, there wasn't a plan. No one considered how to advertise or seed the forum, let alone drive user adoption.

If you're considering ways in which user-generated content can help you achieve business objectives and meet your end users' goals, be very realistic about the fact that it's hard work to make it work well. It *can* happen. But it's neither cheap nor automatic.

Speaking of cheap…

LET'S BUY CONTENT FOR $4

In 2009, Elizabeth Saloka wrote a Brain Traffic blog post titled, "Bangalore, We Have a Problem," that sums things up quite nicely:

> I've just stumbled on a company called Niche Writers India that offers web content for $4. Four. Dollars. That's, like, a sandwich. A gas station sandwich.

> Since when did web content become a cheap commodity? We're not talking about zipper togs and baby socks! We're talking about communication. Often, very technical and advanced communication.

> A sample of what you can expect for your four dollars:

> "Niche Writers India is the core when it comes to writing and this is what our clients feel about our content writing services

expanding to various domains and collaterals. We have bubbling, energetic and youthful warp and woof of writers!"

… Niche Writers India, though not in the manner it intends, makes a compelling case for the value of a good web writer. Hopefully after seeing this site, would-be value shoppers will decide to invest (more than $4) in their content.*

Of course, if you're comparison shopping based on price alone, you may think it's no big deal to sacrifice some degree of quality in order to save money. Don't do that. To truly differentiate yourself online, you must offer content that specifically and authentically embodies your brand. Your content must help your audience *do* something—better, smarter, and with greater ease.

Content that works for your business and that matters to your users is not a commodity. Done well, content can engage your users, answer their questions, and motivate them to take action. Done poorly, it will cause you to lose your audiences' attention and trust.

WE DON'T HAVE TIME TO MAKE A PLAN

Do any of these statements sound familiar?

"This needs to go on the home page."

"We should be on YouTube."

"I need this series of brochures converted for the web."

"We have to put our new mission statement in the About Us section."

"Let's write another dozen articles next month."

"We have to launch a blog."

Oh, really?

Why?

In your desire to deliver—to employers, clients, customers—you may tend to race right past strategy and into execution. It's not that you're not interested in doing the right thing. It's simply that you're under constant

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*http://blog.braintraffic.com/2009/01/bangalore-we-have-a-problem/

pressure to deliver, to do *something* you can show your boss (and your boss's boss). You're expected to churn out requests, tasks, initiatives, and documentation as quickly as possible. That leaves very little time to step back, take a breath, and ask: "Why are we doing all this in the first place?"

Creating content might be a good tactic, but it isn't something you should do just because you *can*.

WE MAKE DEADLY ASSUMPTIONS

Let's say you're a subject matter expert at your company. There's a website redesign project happening, and you've agreed to take responsibility for your department's content. Hooray!

You know the project kicked off sometime last quarter, but you haven't heard much about it since then. Then one fine Tuesday around 2 p.m., an email pops up in your inbox…

> **SUBJECT: Website content: It's go time!**
>
> Hey, you! [Project manager] here. We're *finally* ready to have you start cracking on your share of the content. You should find all the information you need in the attachments:
>
> - Content inventory: Just look for your initials next to the pages you're supposed to write.
> - Page templates: You can build your documentation off of these.
> - Source material: This is what we could come up with. Hopefully it'll do.
> - SEO keyword guidelines: If you have any questions, just let me know.
>
> Okay! If we could see a first draft by A WEEK FROM TOMORROW (next Wednesday), that would be great. Just send it to me. Thank you!

From where you sit, this email might as well have been written in Sanskrit and sent from a land of unicorns and fairy dust. What is all this stuff? What's a page template? Why is your name next to random things in the "About Us" section?

This is exactly the kind of email you'll flag for review, then proceed to ignore for the rest of the week. Why? First, because it's confusing and overwhelming, and it makes you feel stupid. Second, you're fully booked through next week and the project manager is going to have to wait. And finally, you're just straight up resentful that the project manager would assume you could drop everything and do this.

Obviously, this situation sucks, as situations often do when our actions are based on assumptions and not reality. In this instance you (the subject matter expert) and the project manager made a tacit agreement at the beginning of the project: content shouldn't be too hard, because it's probably just some copywriting to support a bunch of content we already have. So let's talk about it later when we're closer to our deadlines.

Gong.

"DOING THE CONTENT" ISN'T LIKE COPYWRITING

When people think about the content development process, they often think about it sort of like baking a cake. Get the ingredients (gather source content); stir them up (compile, write, edit); cook it (finalize and approve); then frost it (add it to the design).

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This is exactly the kind of thinking that leads to eleventh-hour content catastrophes. Because, in reality, "doing the content" is a whole lot more like running a bakery. There are countless details to consider. You have to manage people. Equipment is expensive, and it breaks. And what if the recipes are wrong or the donuts burn or you're losing money… you get the picture.

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Getting your content right requires a whole lot more planning and upkeep than a print brochure. Helping others to understand this reality is a solid first step toward a successful content strategy.

CONTENT IS POLITICAL

Okay! After weeks of blood, sweat, and tears, you have a first draft of the content finished. Whew. Now, it's time to circulate it to the folks who need to review it.

Here's what happens next:

- The information architect hasn't seen this copy since it was "lorem ipsum" in the wireframes, and if she'd known it was going to say THAT, she would have taken a totally different approach.
- Marketing needs to sit down with you to ensure brand, messaging, and word usage are consistent with current campaign and style guidelines. (Which, didn't you hear? Those changed again three weeks ago. Here's the new 100-page manual.)

- The business owners, by the way, aren't too happy with the direction marketing is taking with this new campaign. They're totally missing the boat on at least 14 key benefits, here. Can you take a stab at incorporating those benefits into your copy?

- Legal is sick and tired of the way everyone seems to be willfully ignoring the fact that we are *required by law* to include this 800-word disclaimer on every page that mentions this one particular service. They would prefer to see it at the *top* of the page so that no one will miss it. While they're at it, they have some input about the way you've phrased a few hundred sentences.

- By the way, your CMS team is going to need two months to enter all this content into the CMS now, not two weeks. This is a lot more than they expected. Sorry.

Um. Hey. Whoa.

When it comes to web content, everyone has something to say. And when no one owns the content, priorities clash, and compromise can end up trumping best practices.

Making decisions that are primarily driven by many opinions puts you in danger of a free-for-all that seriously threatens your content quality, consistency, and effectiveness. As the adage goes, you can't make all the people happy all the time. Everyone has an agenda, but there's something you can agree on: You want your content to succeed, both for your business and for your users. A solid content strategy helps align stakeholders on priorities and desired outcomes, which makes life easier for everyone. For more, see *Chapter 4, Alignment.*

When it comes to content, no organizational unit stands alone. The table on page 24 shows how differing priorities and choices can impact content quality.

EVERY ORGANIZATIONAL UNIT HAS AN IMPACT

	IF THEY PRIORITIZE …	AND NEGLECT TO CONSIDER …	THE RISKS ARE …
Business	Budget/ROI Schedule Deliverables	User experience Actual time to develop Project risks	Content doesn't meet user needs Missed deadlines delay project completion
Marketing	Talking about key features and benefits Search engine optimization Ability to measure response	Audience's priorities Customer-facing copy Maintenance post-launch	Content is more promotional than educational Writing suffers from "marketing speak" Content is launched then neglected
Advertising	Campaign-driven creative Highly interactive features Web 2.0 tools	Usability Existing content CMS restrictions or requirements	Content is more flash than substance Content is delivered in animation or graphics that can't be indexed or measured
User Experience	Audience needs and desires Research Visual design	Current state content analysis SEO considerations Planning for content	Business content objectives are overlooked or marginalized Desired content can't be completed by project launch date due to lack of source material, time, or budget
Information Technology	CMS or development requirements Production workflow	People involved in the content creation process Brand and messaging	Content may be published with a "fix-it-later" plan Final published content may not adhere to visual or editorial brand standards

IT'S ALL TOO MUCH AND WE'LL NEVER MOVE FORWARD

Figuring out what exactly is wrong with your world of content isn't always easy. But once you've identified and described the problems in detail, you have a whole new challenge on your hands: deciding what to do next. Of course, that's going to require several conversations with all kinds of people, and those people are going to have questions like:

- What *is* content strategy? How can it help me?

- When does content strategy start? How?

- Who does it? Where can we find these people? Who should they report to? Should we use outside firms to do the work?

- What are the roles and responsibilities people need to assume during the content strategy process?

- We have a website/mobile/CMS project looming (or already underway). Where exactly does content strategy fit in?

And, the question you'll hear the most will likely be the one that keeps you awake at night:

- Why should we invest in content strategy?

These are all excellent questions, and it's very reasonable to expect lots of discussion around them. Depending on your role on a project or in your company, that might be pretty intimidating. But here's what's great: When the time comes, you're going to be the expert everyone turns to for insight and information. You know why? Because you are going to keep reading this book. You are going to learn a whole lot about content strategy in not a whole lot of pages. And then you are going to put on your content strategy cape and get out there to save the content—to be the hero you were always meant to be.

Let's go! (Insert rousing orchestral music and confetti.)