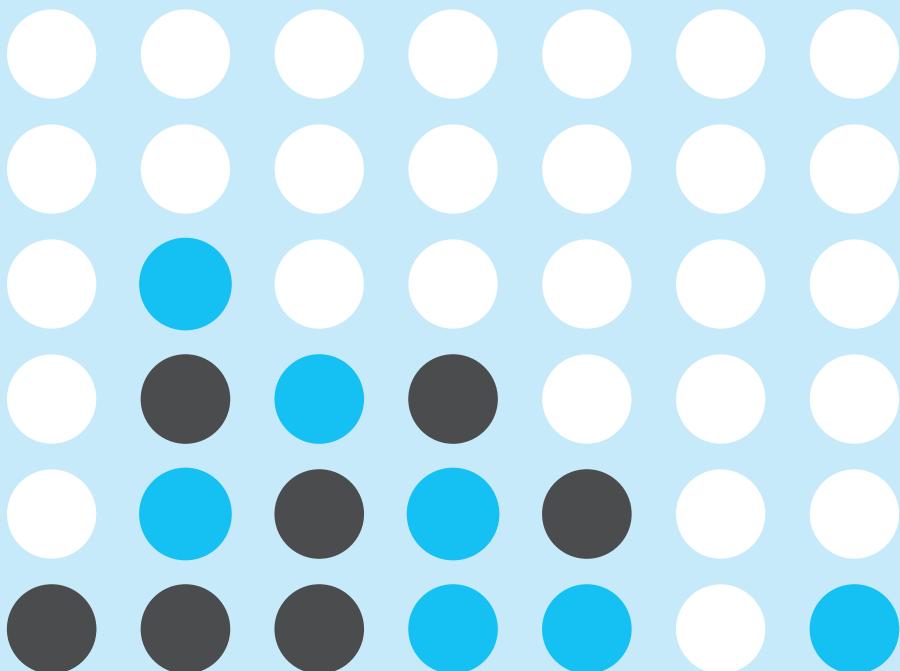


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HOW TO PLAN A

# CONTENT STRATEGY

*A practical guide to web content for brand marketers*



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# HOW TO PLAN A CONTENT STRATEGY

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# A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO WEB CONTENT FOR BRAND MARKETERS

— The main thrust of this eBook is about the preparation you will need to do if you're planning a content strategy for your brand and the starting point for your strategy.

It's based on our experience, as a team, of planning and creating digital content – from blog posts and Tweets to infographics and videos, and everything in between.

Most of us are editors and journalists by trade, and so we approach online content with an editorial mindset. However, we're lucky enough to work cheek by jowl with people journalists haven't always been close to, including data analysts, search engine experts and user experience practitioners.

This odd setting for a team of hacks has given rise to a world view about how content works online, and how best to approach it, that we think is a bit different.

This is our second edition (updated April 2012). We've updated it to clarify some points and consider in a little more detail the importance of network effects (see page 23).

You may be a marketing manager, a digital specialist, or working in a discipline such as SEO or media buying and simply want to know a little more about this thing we call content strategy. Whoever you are, we hope you find it useful – let us know if you did, or what we can do to make the next version better.

Cheers,  
The iCrossing UK Content Team



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Want to skip the theory and get started right away?

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Turn to page 28

**“THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT THING MOST WEBSITES CAN OFFER TO THEIR USERS IS CONTENT THAT THOSE USERS WILL FIND VALUABLE THE ELEMENTS OF USER EXPERIENCE, JESSE JAMES GARRETT”**

## WHAT IS CONTENT?

— For a brand on the web, content is everything that they have to offer.

As marketers talking about content, we have mainly been concerned with the **written word, images, audio and video**. It helps now though to broaden the definition to include **apps, games, tools and even raw data**.

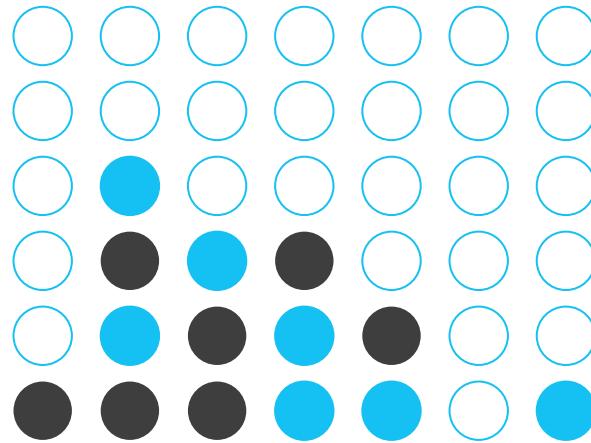


For the record, Wikipedia's current definition of content is:

*“In media production and publishing, content is information and experiences that may provide value for an end-user/audience in specific contexts. Content may be delivered via any medium such as the internet, television, and audio CDs, as well as live events such as conferences and stage performances. The word is used to identify and quantify various formats and genres of information as manageable value-adding components of media.”*

**CONTENT SHOULD BE A LIVING STRATEGY AND A CURRENCY TRADED BETWEEN EMPLOYEES, CUSTOMERS AND CONSUMERS, AND IT IS AS IMPORTANT AS THE ACTUAL PRODUCT A COMPANY PRODUCES.**

**SHAWN PARR,  
BULLDOG DRUMMOND**



If we were to think of the web as a great big game, content is all the pieces you have, create or co-opt to your cause. If we think of digital marketing as an enormous market for attention (and at iCrossing we certainly do) then content is the currency required to win that attention. And if your content is great, and truly useful, it will buy you much more than attention.

Beyond your products and services, content is everything when it comes to marketing, especially brand marketing on the ever-competitive web.

At least that's how we see it.

## WHY DO YOU NEED A CONTENT STRATEGY?

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— It's amazing, given how vital it is to success in brand marketing, that content is often an afterthought - a sub-section of a sub-section of the big, shiny marketing plan.

Creating a content strategy gives us the space to ask: why are we creating content, who are we trying to talk to and what do they want from us? And what will it take - really take - to do this brilliantly, now and long into the future?

Search engine optimisation and paid, promotional activity may be employed to deliver traffic with success judged on the number of hits, pages viewed and the like.

This tactical, technical-led approach has been common, accepted practice for a while, but the habits of web users are changing, and it's no longer enough. While advertising will always be an expense, content can become a company asset.

It's time to grow up about content. Content strategy helps us all do just that.

## A WORD ABOUT ‘CONTENT MARKETING’ AND ‘CONTENT STRATEGY’

At iCrossing we've seen many examples of content marketing used as a 'bolt on' tactic, executed as disposable activity on a campaign by campaign basis.

To achieve authenticity and long-term value for our clients and their customers, we believe these activities need to be rooted more deeply, and therefore form part of a wider content strategy that encompasses the whole business.

So when we're talking about content strategy, we take a wider perspective – embedding a strategic approach to content into the way the business operates.

## THE CONTENT-LED VIEW OF MANAGING BRANDS ONLINE

**— Beyond making the most of your content, we put forward a ‘content first’ view of brand marketing on the web.**

This is a contrast to the approaches based on models of marketing imported from offline, traditional media. These can be characterised as **technical-led** and **media-led**. Sometimes you will see combinations of the two, but either way content loses out in terms of focus, resources and effectiveness.

*Technical-led approaches put the emphasis on creating a website that is functionally and aesthetically superior. It will dazzle any expert in the room, and any user who is running a system capable of making sense of it. Above all, it will be expensive and the proportion of the budget left over for launch content will be minimal, with almost nothing left over for ongoing production and governance of content.*

*Media-led approaches will put the emphasis on delivering traffic to the website, by prioritising SEO, paid search and display ads. Content in this approach is a function rather than a feature, with SEO considerations taking precedence over quality and relevance of the content. Looking beyond traffic to engagement measures (how long they spend using content, viewing videos, sharing and talking about content) often reveals the shortfalls.*

These approaches often reflect short-term e-commerce priorities, but they're not appropriate for long-term brand marketing and may lead to brand erosion. If users feel they've been misled into viewing a sales-focused page when they were researching a product, they will - at the very least - feel frustrated at having their time wasted. At most, they may vent their frustrations on a multitude of social platforms.

When a brand is selling online, it must balance its approach to the sales funnel by considering how it can support users at the awareness, interest and consideration phases as well as the final conversion. Giving content consideration early on in planning and allocating proper resource to it will help to develop a smarter, fully-rounded approach.

If brand impact is the priority, content should not just be a necessary component of the marketing strategy, it should be in the driving seat.

## A 'HEATH ROBINSON' DIGITAL MARKETING STRATEGY

— Digital marketing has not evolved as a single discipline, but as a host of parallel activities. This has brought about a ramshackle marketing machine, cobbled together from different skills and points of view.

One client shared with us the following insight:

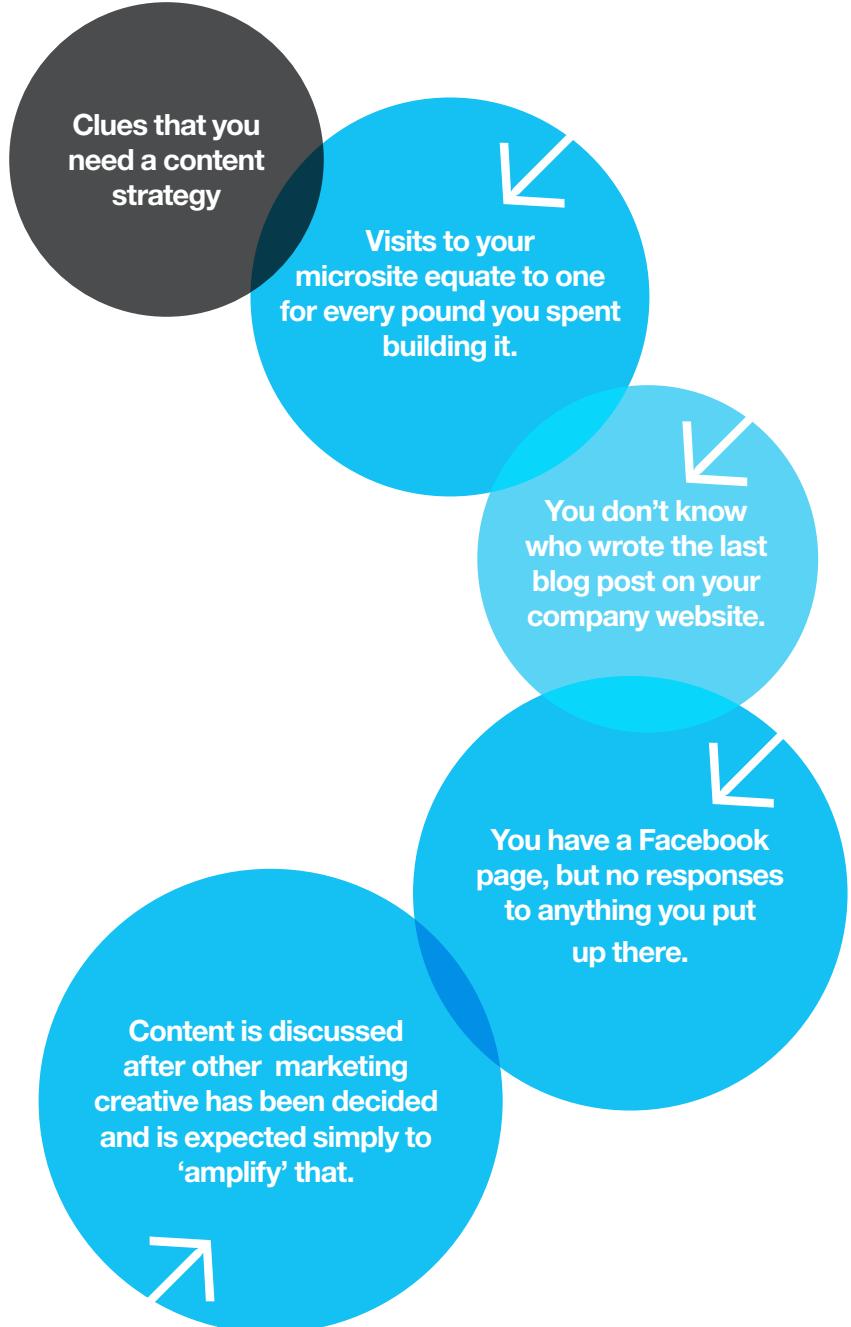
*"If I ask for a marketing challenge to be solved by my digital agencies I will get a different strategy from each. The SEO agency will give a search solution, the creative agency will give a shiny solution, the media agency will talk about what advertising to buy – no one will give a digital strategy."*

Content strategy arbitrates between the demands of different stakeholders and disciplines. It ensures that content, whatever its source, is executed in a coordinated way, contributing to the overall objectives for both the brand and the user.



**Want to see an outline plan for a connected content strategy?**

*Turn to page 23*



## HOW DOES CONTENT TRAVEL IN A NETWORK?

### WHAT'S DIFFERENT (AND WHAT'S THE SAME) ABOUT CONTENT ON THE WEB?

— Indulge us, with a quick walk down memory lane, looking at what we have learned over the last few years.

Most of us in the content team at iCrossing are editors or journalists and have spent a great deal of our time in publishing roles. When the team was created in 2007, we found ourselves in a very unusual place. We were an island of story-obsessed hacks in a sea of SEO and data-focussed performance marketing experts.

The culture clash that ensued was enlightening for everyone involved. We like to think that our SEO colleagues learned that there was more to content than keyword-loaded 'linkbait', and that the search engines were better understood as a means to the users' end than as a funnel to deliver traffic.

In turn these technical wizards taught us about how search engines – and what people type into them – can give us genuinely useful insight to improve the relevance and quality of what we produce. SEO analysis provides us with indisputable facts about the way people use the web, the things they are interested in, and how desires and trends change over time.



**“IT'S NOT IMPOSSIBLE  
TO LAUNCH A GOOD  
NEW BLOG AND  
BECOME WIDELY READ,  
BUT IT'S HARDER THAN  
IT WAS LAST YEAR, AND  
IT WILL BE HARDER  
STILL NEXT YEAR**

**CLAY SHIRKY IN 2003**

”

[icrsng.com/xyGy7w](http://icrsng.com/xyGy7w)

Our colleagues in the social media team helped us to justify and quantify what we already knew as editors and community managers – that the web is as much about the brand conversations that people are having as it is about the things that brands want to talk about (or sell).

They also taught us about the power law of attention distribution on the web. Clay Shirky wrote about it in relation to blogs in 2003, but we've seen this curve play out time and again in network research, content profiling and website analysis.

Once you understand the mechanics behind the web, the idea that websites are like magazines, TV stations, or brochures becomes rather unhelpful. The web is all about networks; networks of people talking, creating and sharing many kinds of new and wonderful things.

All the measures of online success we had previously focused on were about what happened on the website. As the social media team began working with the search team to build network maps showing how content travels and where conversations happen online, we realised that success is just as much about what happens to content once it steps away from the original source.

### **Websites, it became clear, were only half the story. If that.**

When content is successful online, websites can't contain it. It won't stay still – it travels and evolves. And when it's unsuccessful? Well, it just sits there unloved and ignored.

### **PLUS ÇA CHANGE, AND ALL THAT...**

— The early digital era saw the birth of the phrase ‘content is king’ and its subsequent dethroning. But there was an older maxim that we had learned in editorial teams that still holds true; the story is king.

Storytelling, good storytelling, has been the currency of human culture since Neolithic campfires. There are any number of sociological, anthropological and communications theory books analysing how this works and why this is the case, but the common thread is that humans are hard-wired for creating and listening to a well-constructed story.

For us it was clear that stories were as important in content for online marketing as they were for editorial purposes.

**JUST AS IMPORTANT  
AS THE STORY IS  
THE PLAN TO GET  
IT IN FRONT OF  
PEOPLE.**

There were other familiar ways we could see content working its way around online networks. For instance, bad news and gossip still travels at lightning speed – perhaps only slightly faster than when our social networks depended on in-person and telephone conversations rather than instant, network-wide updates on Twitter and Facebook.

But just as important as the story is the plan to get it in front of people in the places that they are already looking.

We have had to learn to be smart about attention and plan for it.

## THE NEWSROOM

— When it comes to production, content was initially conceived within the media model of advertising or producing a short broadcast series. Things were commissioned, produced, polished and released into the wilds of the web.

“  
IF HISTORY WERE TAUGHT IN THE FORM OF STORIES, IT WOULD NEVER BE FORGOTTEN.  
RUDYARD KIPLING  
”



It's rare for this approach to work well; results are rarely proportionate to the significant time and money spent. The amount of attention amongst the people brands are interested in speaking to is limited and investment is by no means a promise of return.

Being editors and journalists by experience, we bring what we think is a more appropriate model for producing content that will succeed in networks: the newsroom.

Newsrooms are story-obsessed, chaotic (like the web), alive to opportunities and ready to drop everything that has been planned and move like lightning when there's an opportunity for a scoop.

They're iterative, alert, close to their customers and their subjects and ready to try things out, adapt them if they don't work and add more resources quickly when they do.

“  
YOU WON'T GET ANYTHING UNLESS YOU HAVE THE VISION TO IMAGINE IT.  
JOHN LENNON  
”

We use this dynamic approach for creating and managing online content, using blogs, Twitter, Facebook and whatever tools are most suitable as our publishing platforms.

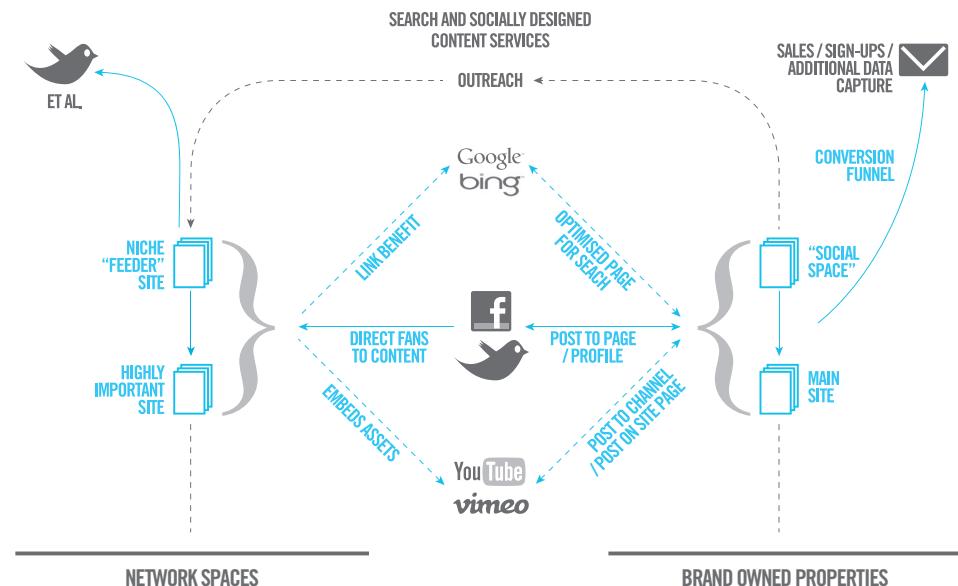
Having experienced editors and journalists on the team has proved its worth not just in terms of perspective and propensity for storytelling. There are many invaluable practical skills too: a focus on finding the correct angle for different audiences; applying consistency in tone and approach; sub-editing for accuracy and quality; awareness of legal issues around copyright, libel and defamation; and managing networks of freelancers to produce additional or specialist content.

All of these things bring the agility of the newsroom, and a commitment to quality produced at speed, within a long term strategic framework.

## SO HOW DO WE DO IT?

At iCrossing, we focus on generating the maximum return on the content and resources you have by understanding the community most relevant to your brand. Our strategies focus on winning trust or 'reputation capital' from the people and sites in that network.

## HOW WE PLAN CONTENT STRATEGY ON THE SOCIAL WEB





We use the social layers of the web – such as Facebook and Twitter – to support and amplify our content.

The right content in the right context not only attracts attention in situ, thereby enhancing awareness, but it provides:

- *link equity to help drive search term positions for relevant keywords.*
- *an opportunity to highlight relevant content to your existing friends and followers.*
- *potential promotions via social media aligned with the site in question, e.g. their own Twitter feed, etc.*
- *an opportunity to run complementary paid media campaigns on the sites in question.*
- *ability to bring long-term value through closer relations with the important people in these networks.*
- *freedom from the necessity of maintaining a large link acquisition budget.*

This content has to be more than a press release, though. Our strategy involves the development of a variety of assets tied to an editorial/production calendar that should include a client's existing marketing activity and allow for new creative. By providing high quality assets that are the result of careful research and are of clear value to the audience we can shape the story that will be told.

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Chapter 5

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## CONTENT STRATEGY SUMMARISED IN QUESTIONS

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— How can you succinctly summarise content strategy development? At iCrossing, we've found that deconstructing the process into the questions we seek to answer along the way provides a practical way to expose the core elements.

1. OBJECTIVES	2. CONTEXT	3. PRINCIPLES	4. APPROACH	5. PLATFORMS	6. RESOURCE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Is the scope of your project to sort out the entire organisation's content, or to plan for a new platform or campaign?</li>   <li>→ Are your overall business goals and the requirements of your customers clearly understood and articulated?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ What do you already have (existing content, in-house expertise, partnerships) that could be an asset for the future?</li>   <li>→ Where are the people and conversations online that matter to you most and what content works for them?</li>   <li>→ What are the opportunities for your brand to be useful to these people in these places, and earn attention and engagement?</li>   <li>→ Are there 'no brainer' opportunities and gaps that you can fill first?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Are all your stakeholders clear about how user attention works online, and what it takes to produce successful digital content?</li>   <li>→ Is your organisation ready to capitalise on the blurring lines between marketing, sales, customer service and PR, and produce content that puts the user first every time?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Given your shared understanding of the objectives, context, and principles - in what direction will your content strategy take your organisation?</li>   <li>→ Before you get stuck into the detail, is everyone who has a stake in the success of this new strategic direction on board?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ What tools will you require to execute this strategy?</li>   <li>→ What guiding principles for content can you apply to the use of each platform?</li>   <li>→ How much production effort will each require and what processes need to be in place?</li>   <li>→ Will your strategy result in a renewable and reviewable activity plan that is more than just a creative idea or series?</li>   <li>→ How will your content offering be promoted away from spaces over which you have direct control, via online PR and outreach, and through paid media?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Are you aware of realistic content creation and governance resources and do you have the people and the budgets you need?</li>   <li>→ How will you access the specialist editorial, SEO, technical, PR and legal expertise you need?</li>   <li>→ How will you put contingencies in place to allow you to move quickly and capitalise on success?</li> </ul>

# THE PLANNING PROCESS

— Developing your content strategy and plan should begin as early as possible in the creation of a new website, campaign or other online activity. If content has been left until the last minute, you can still get your strategy together, but you'd better get a move on.

## WHEN DOES CONTENT STRATEGY HAPPEN?

After user research to understand what your audience expects from your brand, content strategy should be the next step on your project plan, before you start wireframing or developing site architecture. Content strategists, information architects, user experience specialists and designers should be working in partnership from the very earliest stages of the design phase.

Planning should be seen as a process of establishing your content team or function and then sustaining it. After the initial phase of getting things going, ensure that time and milestones have been set for regular reviews and updates of the approach.

## TIMELINE



*This timeline illustrates the process for a content strategy project at eBay, focused on its business sellers across Europe. Note the seven-month period spent building relationships between teams - a lot of content strategy is about creating sustainable conditions for the ongoing planning, creation and governance of content, which may well mean bringing stakeholders together in a new way.*

Timeline produced with permission of Nikki Tiedtke, from when she was EU Senior Content Strategist for eBay.

The full presentation can be viewed at [icrsng.com/xe80mG](http://icrsng.com/xe80mG)

## WHO NEEDS TO BE INVOLVED?

— In addition to timing, you'll need to involve the right stakeholders from across your organisation and any partner agencies. Don't think of this as developing a strategy by committee (that way lies madness) but of having contacts in the right places to contribute to and support the overall content strategy.

Remember: you probably have more content than you think. Some of your existing marketing materials and corporate communication may well find a new lease of life online with a smart and clearly defined content strategy. Your stakeholders will help you to uncover the treasure trove; your strategy will make sure it's used appropriately.

Legal, IT, PR and customer service may all have a direct, supporting or partner role in the development of a content strategy, but it's likely to be the product development team, retail buyers or local managers who will be the best source of stories and content ideas.

## BE CLEAR ABOUT WHY

— A good content strategy should begin with a clear line drawn connecting an organisation's business and/or marketing goals and those being set out specifically for content.

“  
COMING TOGETHER  
IS A BEGINNING;  
KEEPING TOGETHER  
IS PROGRESS;  
WORKING TOGETHER  
IS SUCCESS.  
HENRY FORD  
”

As a rule, brands that are clearest about their own identity and values tend to have the easiest time defining objectives for their content.

Simple articulations of the purpose behind a content strategy may go something like:

- *Why are we creating content online? To visibly meet the needs of our customers and demonstrate our unique expertise.*
- *What will the benefits be? Customer satisfaction, visibility, engagement and feedback - leading directly and indirectly to increased sales.*

You and your team may be clear on the reasons to develop online content according to an overarching plan, but being able to consistently tell the story of why you are doing so to your colleagues will help eliminate confusion and grow support for the strategy.

Be prepared to make your best bet on what will be successful, then adjust or completely change tack as you start to see the impact of your content online. Use analytics and user research to check what you need to do more of or less of, and what you just need to stop doing altogether.

## APPROACH AND PRINCIPLES

— Being clear about your principles is an important part of creating an effective content strategy. Following on from the ‘why’, this is the ‘how’, as in how you will behave to be successful. Clear principles help to inform editorial decisions alongside the rest of the marketing mix and give editors, writers, producers and other creatives on your team licence to try interesting approaches they might otherwise presume were off-limits.

“  
TIMING,  
PERSEVERANCE AND  
TEN YEARS OF  
TRYING WILL  
EVENTUALLY MAKE  
YOU LOOK LIKE AN  
OVERNIGHT  
SUCCESS.  
BIZ STONE, TWITTER  
”

It's best to formulate and articulate your own principles, most likely relating to your brand's mission statement. But let us share some of our own here, many of which have been borrowed and adapted by our clients.

As we have mentioned, iCrossing's approach to content strategy is best expressed as editorially driven and informed by data. We like to use the newsroom as a model, with the ethos, processes and practices that entails.

Opposite are some of the ways we think about content strategy.

- *Be on the side of the user:*  
*Editorial content is created with the user in mind, rather than the brand. This mindset is more likely to create things that are useful to users and therefore earn attention.*
- *Be platform agnostic:*  
*We do not start with a Facebook strategy (or a blog, or a YouTube channel), we start with quality content that will be interesting to our users. When we create content, we look at which platforms and tools are going to offer the best chance of it being seen and shared.*
- *Make it portable, findable, shareable:*  
*Great content is built to travel, so users should be able to copy, download, embed and share it as they like. Search engine optimisation is essential; search engines have to be able to see and make sense of our stuff so they can show it to our audience.*
- *Fail fast:*  
*What we learned from our tech-minded colleagues was an attitude that works for content as much as it works for start ups and apps: release early, release often. Things that work get more effort behind them, things that don't we learn and move on from.*
- *Stay close to the data:*  
*We talk to the various data analysts and social media analysts who sit near us about what their research is telling us about our content, how it is being used and where there might be opportunities to generate more interest or fill a gap.*
- *Be prepared to be surprised:*  
*It's a liberating principle and one which has given rise to some of our biggest successes for clients. When opportunity comes and it isn't what you are expecting, be prepared to move quickly, be prepared to ditch the plans for that week and go after it with everything you have at your disposal.*

## AUDITS AND RESEARCH

**— You cannot put together a content strategy without research. There is no getting around this. If an agency proposes content strategy without doing some digging, be very suspicious. What they probably mean is “some content ideas from a brainstorming session we had”. They might be great ideas. But content strategy is about understanding where your marketing and brand objectives overlap with the content needs of online audiences. That takes research. To put it another way: why would you try and guess what your customers want when you can just ask them?**

**RESEARCH WILL  
HELP YOU QUALIFY  
THE ‘GUT INSTINCT’  
DECISIONS**



### NETWORK RESEARCH

There are three main elements to the research we do at iCrossing. Armed with the findings from these, you should have sufficient insights to start planning your own approach and activity.

This inevitably takes in all forms of online content with the goal of understanding the networks around your brand, or communities of interest.

Take time to look at:

- *Where your brand (and peers) are discussed online.*
- *What the themes are that relate to your brand and its products or services.*

For some brands and sectors, where conversation online is very limited or often negative, network research can help to identify networks and topics that might ‘suit’ your brand and help build awareness or positive sentiment.

Depending on the extent of conversations and communities online, you will need to simplify and prioritise which you will develop content for and which you’ll continue listening to.

### USER RESEARCH

There is still no better way to find out what someone wants than to ask them. User research will help you qualify the ‘gut instinct’ decisions and direct your energies towards activity that is going to please people rather than bore or annoy them.

Of course budgets don’t always stretch to this form of research, but at iCrossing if we don’t have budget to directly ask people what they want we will still conduct informal research to help understand users.

You can do the same. Make use of your intranet if you have one – put up a short survey and ask employees to take part and share it with their friends beyond the organisation. Ask friends of friends who fit your user profile if they’ll answer a few questions in their lunch hour in return for a book token or a bottle of wine. Get someone in your family to attempt some specific tasks on your website while you observe without helping them.

All of these things can give you a huge amount of insight into what it’s like to be someone who doesn’t know as much about what your website is supposed to be doing as you do.

## CONTENT PROFILING

KEY CONTENT TYPES	NEWS	N	Y	N	N	N	N	Y	N	Y	N
BLOG ENTRIES	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N
MAPS	N	N	Y	Y	N	N	N	Y	N	N	N
ITINERARIES	Y	N	N	N	Y	N	N	N	Y	N	Y
DESTINATION GUIDES	Y	N	Y	N	N	N	Y	N	N	Y	N
EXPERT REVIEWS	N	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N
TOOLS	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	Y	N	N
VIDEOS	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N	N	N	N
IMAGE GALLERIES	N	N	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N	Y
UGC											
USER REVIEWS	N	N	N	Y	N	N	Y	Y	N	N	N
FORUM	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	Y	Y	Y
OTHER UGC	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	Y	Y	N
3RD PARTY CONTENT											
SPONSORED CONTENT	N	N	N	Y	N	N	N	Y	N	N	N
CONTENT PARTNERSHIP	N	N	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	N	Y	N
AGGREGATED CONTENT	N	N	N	N	Y	N	N	N	Y	N	N
<a href="http://travelswithcontent.co.uk">travelswithcontent.co.uk</a> <a href="http://flybynight.com">flybynight.com</a> <a href="http://contentstrategyweekends.com">contentstrategyweekends.com</a> <a href="http://auditnyvilla.com">auditnyvilla.com</a> <a href="http://profilemylife.com">profilemylife.com</a> <a href="http://worldwide-editors-getaways.com">worldwide-editors-getaways.com</a> <a href="http://tropicaleditorialgetaways.co.uk">tropicaleditorialgetaways.co.uk</a> <a href="http://notbeenjustresearchedit.com">notbeenjustresearchedit.com</a> <a href="http://writeupthenile.com">writeupthenile.com</a> <a href="http://escapeonthecrowdsourcing.org">escapeonthecrowdsourcing.org</a> <a href="http://blaggedapresstrip.com">blaggedapresstrip.com</a>											

## OTHER RESEARCH INPUTS

Once we know what the online world looks like for a brand and what users have on their minds, we can start looking for opportunity.

One method we use is to take a sample of the most relevant websites within a network, be they independent media, user-owned or belonging to competitors, and analyse the forms of content they make available.

This exercise can throw up two types of insight in particular: it shows which types of content are popular within a given network, and also highlights where there are gaps that may constitute an opportunity.

The example on the left uses a simple 'yes' or 'no' indicator to show if content exists. You may wish to be more elaborate with a traffic light system, or marks out of ten to offer an indication of quality as well as presence.

As well as researching user needs and profiling networks, we value the insights that can be gained from the following types of research:

→ **Content audit:**  
*When preparing for a site redesign, a full review of the existing site is essential. Sites typically grow without a single point of oversight, and staff change over time. In many cases, no single person knows the extent (or quality) of what's already in existence. How can you plan what you need if you don't know what you've already got?*

→ **Existing creative assets:**  
*Reviewing what is already available can reveal all sorts of materials that are either under-used or not online at all. Historical advertising campaigns, newsletters, reports and even raw data might all be potential assets in the hands of a smart, editorially-minded team.*

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## SOME LIKELY OUTPUTS FROM YOUR STRATEGY

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— Your content strategy should give you clear direction for what content will be produced, where, when and by whom - and how it's going to be managed over time. To develop the detail, and make it practical for everyone involved, we break down the strategy into themes, activities and key elements that your strategy will need to consider.

### CONTENT CALENDAR

An integrated content calendar is the backbone of your digital programme, aligning editorial, PR and marketing efforts. It may include scheduled product content releases, editorial articles, video, Tweets, Facebook status updates and promotions, and it must show the relationships between different platforms.

It should be available to stakeholders across your organisation, with regular planning sessions so it continues to evolve.

### STYLE GUIDE

This is more than a light version of your brand guidelines. It provides a guide to tone of voice and your brand's ethos when it comes to creating different forms of content. As well as helping a content team to define their approach internally, it is vital when briefing freelancers and commissioning third party content.

## OWNED CONTENT

Your content is a valuable business asset, so treat it well. Live content, cared for by a dedicated editorial team, should be as current and accurate as possible. The strategy should outline a regular review process to establish what content needs to be updated and what can be archived.

“  
THE IMPORTANT  
THING IS THE  
DIVERSITY  
AVAILABLE ON THE  
WEB.  
TIM  
BERNERS-LEE  
”

When archived, content should be marked clearly as such, so that a user is able to tell immediately that this is there for posterity rather than what reflects the here and now. If you have a more up-to-date version, make sure the signposting is there.

The other path for making more of owned content is – when it still seems to be consistently popular – to develop a dedicated landing page or area for it. An old blog post could be a real traffic driver if it's skinned in the right way.

## COMMISSIONING

Depending on the skills your content team has in its locker, it is likely that they will benefit from being able to commission specialist pieces, be it longer-form content such as eBooks, or things that require specialist skills such as video, infographics, Facebook and mobile apps and audio podcasts.

If possible, allow budget to create these types of assets; pre-plan some and allow others to be defined by the content team. Once the content programme is live, new opportunities will become clear, so be flexible.

## DEVELOPING THE ACTIVITY PLAN

### THIRD-PARTY CONTENT

Content planning often ignores the opportunity that third-party content represents. You can be useful by directing people to the ‘best of’ content that’s out there on any given subject, whether it’s a hot consumer issue or conversation about one of your own products.

As long as you’re mindful of licensing and copyright (see your legal team for specific advice) you can link out to or post great content from elsewhere – even competitors’ sites if you’re feeling brave. Embeddable widgets from sites like Flickr and YouTube can help you to showcase great content on your own website.

As well as being useful to people visiting your website or social media presences, it can be a great way to connect with the wider network of individuals and communities interested in the same themes, thus making your brand a genuine part of the conversation.

Just make sure you have a sensible balance between curating and creating.

## RESOURCES

You need to have a dedicated resource to create content for your brand. Experienced online editors and writers bring highly desirable skills to this role and ideally they should also have online community management experience. A specialist community manager is also an increasingly important role for many teams; where it's not yet available, ensure that the marketing or PR team members have:

- *journalism or copywriting skills*
- *commissioning experience*
- *clear guidance on how much time they have to dedicate to content creation and governance – it should not be an add-on, extra-curricular activity or nice-to-have*
- *access to legal, IT, customer service team support as required*

As well as support from the above functions, the team should sit close to those who look after website analytics, social media monitoring and other research and measurement related activities.

And don't forget that your team will need tools to help them – access to site analytics, a user-friendly content management system, and software to allow them to manipulate images and graphics in a simple way.

## DISTRIBUTION

— Ensure that regular consideration and revision is given to distribution strategies. While SEO is an essential part of content creation online, it may be that paid search, advertising, syndication or content partnerships might also be useful elements. The content team should be able to have frequent discussions about opportunities with other internal teams.

If possible, make sure that any social networks, from your Facebook page to your blog, are linked to or promoted in relevant spaces that the brand owns, including intranets and employee communications.

## MEASUREMENT AND LISTENING

Measurement is too often something that is only used retrospectively, to judge how successful a given activity has been. While this is important, content measurement is often useful immediately, giving valuable clues and insights into what users want from your content and how they intend to use it.

Online content teams should be able to see live user activity so they can adapt where the need arises. As well as this focus on the website, they should use monitoring tools to listen to what users are saying about their content and related themes across the web.

The IAB's social media measurement framework is very similar to iCrossing's; take a look for some more detail on this approach:  
[icrsng.com/xAb19c](http://icrsng.com/xAb19c)

## FURTHER READING AND LINKS

We hope that this brief collection of thoughts and suggestions about developing your content strategy will prove useful.

**Want to know more?**  
Have a read of the following:

### BLOGS

*Brain Traffic*  
[braintraffic.com](http://braintraffic.com)

*Connect*  
[connect.icrossing.co.uk/tag/  
content-strategy/](http://connect.icrossing.co.uk/tag/content-strategy/)

*Eat Media*  
[eatmedia.net/blog/](http://eatmedia.net/blog/)

### BOOKS

*Content Strategy for the Web*  
Kristina Halvorson

*Clout: The Art and Science of Influential Web Content*  
Colleen Jones

*The Elements of Content Strategy*  
Erin Kissane

### OTHER CONTENT STRATEGY RESOURCES

*Content Strategy Google Group*  
[icrsng.com/xPsapA](http://icrsng.com/xPsapA)

*Content Strategy Knol*  
[icrsng.com/FQ1iV1](http://icrsng.com/FQ1iV1)

*LinkedIn Content Strategy Group*  
[icrsng.com/z77OOg](http://icrsng.com/z77OOg)

*Twitter*  
[#contentstrategy](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



### TRISHA BRANDON

*Trisha joined iCrossing in 2010 to help grow its content strategy services and is now Content Director. She has 16 years' experience in digital content and product development, working with leading women's, health, food and lifestyle brands.*

*She has worked on content strategies for STA Travel, Kaspersky Labs, P&O Ferries and LA Fitness. Trisha also likes to create order and simplicity out of messiness, like organising socks and unpicking knots.*

*She tweets as @trishab*

### CHARLIE PEVERETT

*Charlie joined the company as a journalist in 2007, and developed the content team's news and blogging services with brands such as MORE TH>N, Charcol and Toyota.*

*In 2009 he became iCrossing's first Content Strategist, and has since worked on content strategies for brands including Virgin Atlantic's vtravelled, STA Travel and Visit Wales. He specialises in editorial content strategy and social media, and is driven by the potential for non-traditional publishers to become trusted providers of content.*

*He tweets as @cpev.*

### DANNY CHADBURN

*Danny joined iCrossing as a Content Strategist in early 2012, bringing with him over 10 years' experience from the realms of public, private and charity sectors.*

*The bulk of this time was spent with online recruitment behemoths Totaljobs and Monster, and millions continue to benefit from the expert career advice content he developed in text, audio, video and interactive formats. Danny classes himself as a content connoisseur and is on a one man mission to make the web a better place.*

*He tweets as @totally\_content*

## ABOUT ICROSSING

iCrossing UK is a digital marketing agency that specialises in search and social media.

We design and build search and social media strategies for some of the world's biggest brands, including The Coca-Cola Company, Toyota, Virgin, Bank of America, and TK MAXX.

iCrossing UK is part of iCrossing, one of the world's largest, digital marketing agencies, which employs 750 employees in 18 offices around the globe, including 125 staff based at UK offices in London and Brighton.

iCrossing has won numerous accolades, including the number one-ranked agency for both paid and natural search in Forrester Research's 2009 Wave report of US search marketing agencies, OMMA's Search Agency of the Year, Best Use of Search at the Revolution Awards and a finalist for Revolution's Agency of the Year award. We are also the only agency with two Forrester social-media case studies to its name.

iCrossing is a unit of Hearst Corporation, one of the world's largest diversified media companies.

For more information please visit:

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