GYMNASIUM

WRITING FOR WEB AND MOBILE

Lesson 1 Handout

Seeing Content As Conversation

ABOUT THIS HANDOUT

This handout includes the following:

- A list of the core concepts covered in this lesson.
- The assignment(s) for this lesson.
- A list of readings and resources for this lesson including books, articles and websites mentioned in the videos by the instructor, plus bonus readings and resources hand-picked by the instructor.
- A transcript of the lecture videos for this lesson

CORE CONCEPTS

1. One of the key goals of the lean approach to content strategy is to find the right words to use before designing the visual interface and user experience.
2. Lean Content is defined as reliable, authentic and direct language. Successful lean content helps build the user's confidence and trust which has the benefit of driving growth in your business and brand.
3. The difference between Lean Content, Content Strategy and Content Marketing is this: Lean Content is about the language that converts users to customers and Content Strategy is the planning of how content gets extended to other channels and Content Marketing is the actual production of that content.
4. We can measure whether our content is effective not only when users convert to customers but also when they tell others about their experience.

ASSIGNMENTS

1. Quiz
2. Find an example of Lean Content.
3. Look at the websites of companies you trust, then identify specific sentences or paragraphs that are Reliable, Authentic, and Direct.
4. Bonus points if you…
   Are able to take an end-to-end journey through a single transaction/interaction (e.g., purchase, sign up for a newsletter)

   Can find examples beyond their website (e.g., social feed, product packaging, advertising) that's demonstrates the same voice.

RESOURCES

- "Content Strategy," "Lean Startup," and "Refresh" events (typically you can find these all on meetup.com (http://www.meetup.com/))
- UIE.com (http://www.uie.com) - Sign up for UIEtips (newsletter), listen to podcasts, and register for their virtual seminars and in-person conferences
- "The Digital Crown: Winning at Content on the Web" by Ahava Leibtag (http://ahamediagroup.com/thedigitalcrown/)
- Content Strategy for Mobile" by Karen McGrane (http://www.abookapart.com/products/content-strategy-for-mobile)
- "Interviewing Users: How to Uncover Compelling Insights" by Steve Portigal (http://rosenfeldmedia.com/books/interviewing-users/)

INTRODUCTION

(Note: This is an edited transcript of the Writing for Web and Mobile lecture videos. Some students work better with written material than by watching videos alone, so we're offering this to you as an optional, helpful resource. Some elements of the instruction, like live coding, can't be recreated in a document like this one.)

Hello, and welcome to Writing for Web and Mobile: The Lean Approach to Creating Content. My name is Stephanie Hay, and I use words to design awesome user experiences. This is what I've been doing over the last 10 years as a project manager, content strategist, and as an independent consultant working with clients like Ben and Jerry's and the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

What I'm going to be covering in this course are the tools and tips to write for web and mobile, and also a technique called Content-First UX Design, which is a methodology for using content as the basis of UX design.

The core focus of this course is going to be on writing content that engages and converts users to buyers. When I say "engages," I mean readers actually engage with your content: they hit "Like," they share it with a friend, they pass it along. When I say "converts," I mean they actually open their wallet and buy something or maybe they/to find the right words to use whenever we're writing. Also we'll be digging into some social networks like Facebook and Twitter, the things that you're used to, but I'm going to show you where to look to find great data on your customers.

Now, why is using customer data to write content so powerful in the first place? When we use customer data, rather than just throwing things against the wall and seeing if they'll work, content is actually shared more. Customers, as a result, also buy more because they understand the content. Maybe they even found it better because you're using their language. Teams collaborate more when we use customer data to make decisions about UX design. I'm going to show you that during the Content-First UX Design process. Finally, more high fives are had by everyone on the team. And who can have too many high fives? (Let's be honest.)

This is a practical course. It came from conversations that we had with clients about where their writing needs were. Over and over they said, "We need to find people who can use customer data to write compelling content for web and mobile."
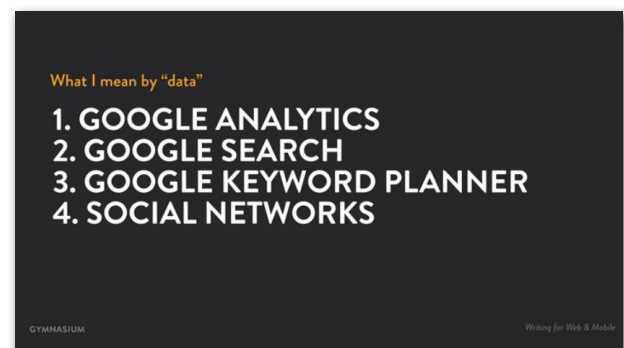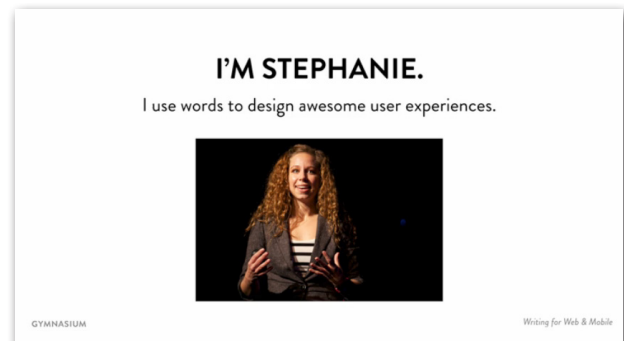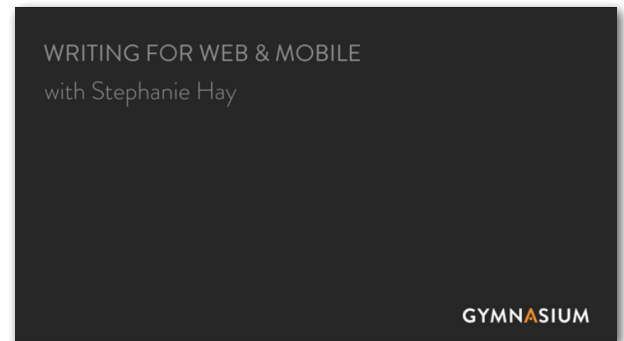
This was different than saying, "We need people who can make things sound sexy." They were looking for people who could understand analytics and be strategic. That's what we're going to be learning in this course.

It's very hands on. You can be expecting to do some work here. In Lesson One we're going to be going over the philosophy behind this course, in particular, digging into what is lean content, content strategy, and content marketing.

In Lesson Two,we're going to gather customer data, and I'm going to show you how to do that, where to look, and what the variables are to keep in mind.

We're then going to, in Lesson Three, figure out what to actually write. We'll be walking through a mock kick-off meeting with a client to think about how we can actually gather qualitative data from stakeholders and clients.

In Lesson Four, we'll start writing real content: the kind of content we want end users to see and the kind of content that's based on customer data.

In Lesson Five, we'll begin writing user experience flows.I call these Conversation Maps. This is the basis of Content-First UX Design, and it shapes the entire experience from end to end using content as the basis.

Finally in Lesson Six, I'll show you how all of this works in real life using a case study of a client of mine, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, so you can see exactly what we did from start to finish and even have access to the tools that we used along the way.


So the two main sections of this course are to focus on analytics and then on writing. After each lesson you'll be presented with an assignment and also a brief quiz. Both are optional, but you'll want to do them because they're totally great.

If you have questions, go ahead and add them to the forum. That's where I'll be to answer those questions, and other classmates will be able to jump in and answer your questions as well.

Now without further ado, let's get into the first lesson.

HOW CONTENT GROWS COMPANIES

This is "Seeing Content as a Conversation: How Content Grows Companies." We start by telling you about Lloyd Morissett. In 1967, Lloyd Morrisett went to a dinner party and this was a guy who was pretty fascinated by TV, in particular, how kids seem to not be able to take their eyes off of it. At this dinner party he met Joan Ganz Cooney. She happened to be a producer at WNET, Channel 13, which was New York City's number-one public broadcasting station.
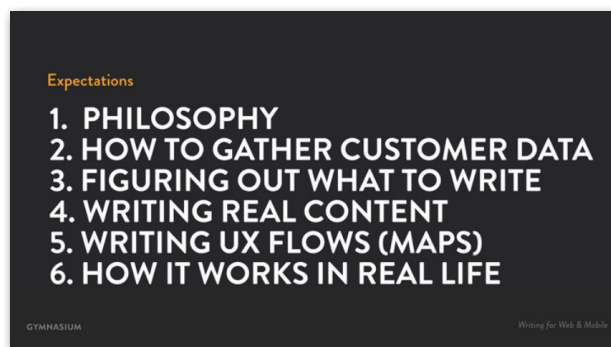
They talked at length at this dinner party about television and how it could be influential in educating kids. What if we could master the addictive qualities of television and do something good with them? This is what they talked about.

Now, the political environment was sort of primed for something to happen because this guy, Newton Minnow, who was the chairman of the FCC at the time, a few years prior had made a very famous speech called "The Vast Wasteland Speech." In it he said this: "When television is bad, nothing is worse. I invite each of you to sit down in front of your station for a day, without a book, without a magazine, without a newspaper, without an iPad (just kidding, he didn't say that), without a profit and loss sheet or a rating book. Keep your eyes glued to that set until the station signs off. I can assure you, what you will observe is a vast wasteland."

Does this sound familiar to the web? I mean, Newton Minnow, the chairman of the FCC is saying "Look, television is pretty much terrible, you guys. You have to be doing something better. The content here isn't great."

That's what Joan and Lloyd were talking about. They wanted to create content based on actual research and then measure whether it was teaching kids to read and count. They knew that there was an opportunity to rise above the noise and they did. Aren't we glad, because Sesame Street came to be.

It only came to be after they found the "right" formula. They actually created small amounts of content and tested those to make sure that they, the kids, were actually paying attention. Only after they found out what the secret formula was to keep the kids paying attention and to be able to learn, did they start continually writing and publishing and measuring new content.

As they continued to measure if the content actually taught kids, they continued to grow.

Sesame Street is ubiquitous around the world and I actually encourage you to check out this video. Check out the link here to see a young James Earl Jones reading the alphabet. It may be painful for us adults to sit through a minute 34 getting from A to Z, but Sesame Street actually found that by waiting three seconds in between each letter, the kids started shouting out the next letter. Clear proof that they were learning.

It's all thanks to Lloyd Morrisett who pioneered a data-driven method for creating educational content on TV. Imagine if we could do this for the web. What if we as teams who are designing for web and mobile knew the right words to use before we designed entire products around them and before we designed the visual interface, the user experience, and then launched it to the public and hoped
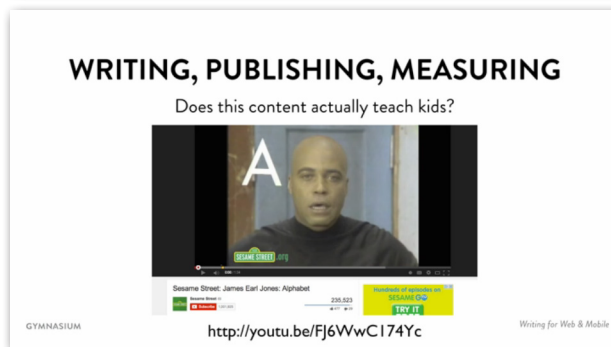
that it worked? Well, that's what we're going to be focusing on in this course.

We're going to be learning how content drives growth and where to find the "right" words to make sure that that content actually does drive growth. We'll be using analytics, search, and social channels to find the "right" words and then we'll create some content documentation that'll help to drive our UX design and also our UX design discussions with our teams and stakeholders. Then finally, we'll be designing conversations. We'll be being very strategic about what we say and to whom and we'll extend those conversations across web and mobile channels.

LEAN CONTENT

So one of the things that is a core component of this course is this notion of "lean content." The term "lean" comes actually from Toyota manufacturing days. They wanted to reduce their risk. They didn't want to build a bunch of cars and ship them out and hope that somebody bought them.

So they started this just-in-time manufacturing. It reduced risk, reduced waste, and created higher profits. You may have heard the terms "lean startup", "lean UX" or "design thinking." These are the tech industries adaptations of lean manufacturing as it came from Toyota. In the same way, we try to reduce our risk and reduce our waste by ensuring the what we are designing and launching to a customer is actually something that customer wants.

So lean content is reliable, authentic, and direct. It builds the user's confidence and trust. This is our mechanism of communication. If we can't build the user's confidence and trust, they can't engage with our content and they can't convert at the level that we want them to. As a way to remember what lean content is, it's RAD: reliable, authentic, and direct.

So what are some examples of this? What do I mean by "reliable?" Essentially, it sets and meets users expectations consistently. This is already a tall order for a lot of the noise that exists out there in the marketing content, makes big sweeping promises but doesn't deliver, and it's created a skeptical audience online.

Reliable content is what we expect from Google. Google promised to be the world's best search. If we actually go to Google and search for anything, let's say, Aquent, of course, we're going to type in "Aquent," we immediately see Aquent as the primary results. Well, that might be understandable. This is a brand.

What if we search for something like "awesome." Well, we again get all kinds of search results and the ability to limit
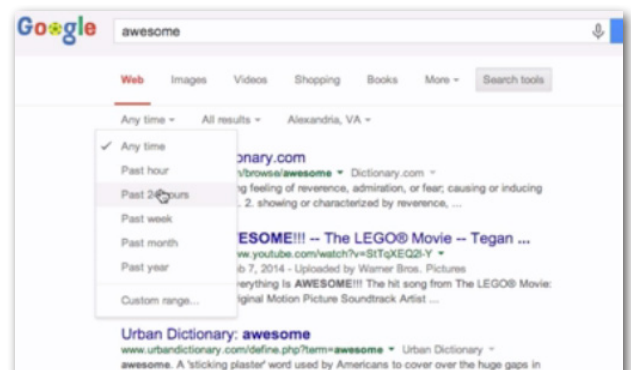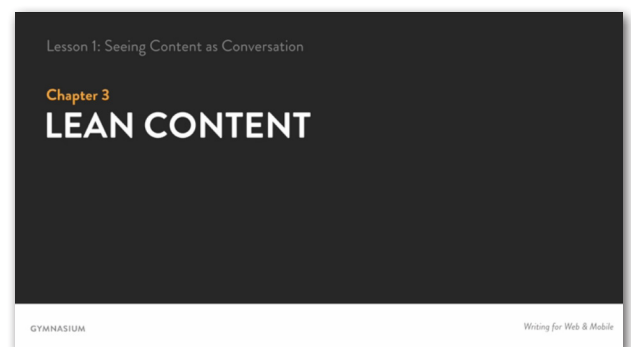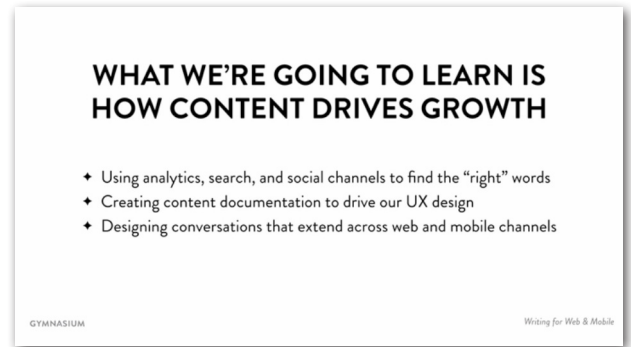
them to continually make sure that the best results are showing up front and center. As long as Google continues to refine its algorithm to ensure that the best results are always front and center, it will continue to be reliable and we'll continue to build trust with it.

Authentic. Authentic "feels" like a real conversation is happening between the user and the interface. The language is natural, it's clear, it feels like you are talking to the same person across channels and across time. That also helps to build trust and confidence even when you mess up.

Here @Gmail tweeted about the iOS app, and they straight up admitted to a problem: "Today contained a bug with notifications. We've pulled the app to fix the problem. Sorry we messed up." You could see how many people actually already had engaged with this tweet just because it was authentic.


Similarly, if you clear all of the email out of your Inbox, Google thinks about the microcopy of this experience: "You're all done! Please enjoy your day." This is a small detail the makes a big difference. And it's authentic to the voice of Google.

And finally, lean content is direct. It doesn't get in its own way. It gives you exactly what you need to make a decision to engage or convert. That's what Newegg does on its website.

This is a traditional e-commerce site focusing on technology products. And if we go ahead and search for a particular, let's say, we're going to check out the laptops today, we get to see all of the specifications involved with this particular product. It's not trying to cloud us with marketing language. We even see the reviews front and center.

LEAN CONTENT IS...

+ Reliable: It sets and meets the user's expectations, consistently
+ Authentic: It "feels" like a real conversation is happening between the user and the interface; the language is natural and clear
+ Direct: It gives you exactly what you need to make a decision; it doesn't get in its own way

Furthermore, Newegg publishes its customer questions and answers. This helps us actually learn about the product and learn about what the experience is, whether or not this product actually met expectations. This builds trust and confidence and that's what lean content is all about. That's how it helps to drive growth.

After all, words are how people find you, understand you, and choose you. If we use a lot of marketing speak in the stuff we write, people who are searching for what we have to offer in the search engines will never find us because we're not speaking their language. We need to use analytics data from tools like Google or Facebook or YouTube to figure out what that language is and then speak the language of our users or our customers.
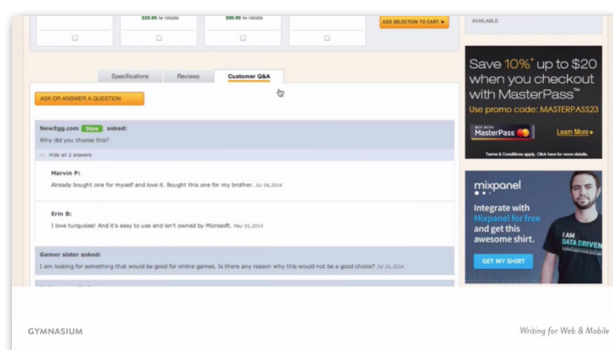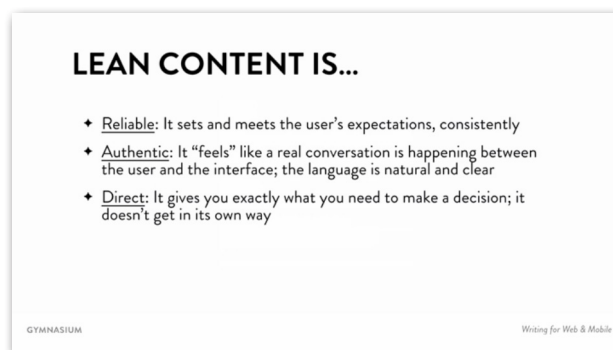
Which means we really have to know our audience. When it comes to writing great content for web and mobile, it's not a creative endeavor that happens in a black box. It comes from forming conversations with the customers we're trying to engage and convert.

It also means that we have to prioritize clarity above anything else. That's where the data-driven decision making comes into play. It's essential. We need to edit for comprehension rather than writing for cleverness. Often, marketing teams might find this boring, but customers and users do not. Companies that are focused on growth won't either because they understand that reaching and connecting with the customers is vital to growth. Again, words are how people find us, understand us, and choose us. So we have to get them right.

CONTENT STRATEGY AND CONTENT MARKETING

So you might be asking yourself how content strategy and content marketing play into this. What are they? What's the difference between content strategy and content marketing?

Well, if you think about lean content as the process of finding the reliable, authentic, direct language that converts users to customers, then content strategy establishes how the reliable, authentic, direct contact will extend to more channels. This is how we as a company will take what we know works, what we know is connecting with the customers, and make sure that it's part of all of the digital properties that they might be interacting with.

That's one of the things that Zappos is actually best known for. Zappos has done experiments to find that, for example, whenever it has videos of its products, it will help to sell those products. They actually help to cut down on the number of returns, too. They also have found that wrapping all of their product information in great, specific content that also includes reviews and how things actually fit and whether customers had their expectations met, continue to form a trusting relationship to take one buyer and make that buyer a repeat buyer and actually increase the reach of that buyer. That buyer now tells friends.

Here's the mobile view of the Zappos site. Again, the product is front and center, but much of the content that exists on the web experience is part of the product description. They even continue the same reliable, authentic, direct content in their language about free returns. This is an important part of
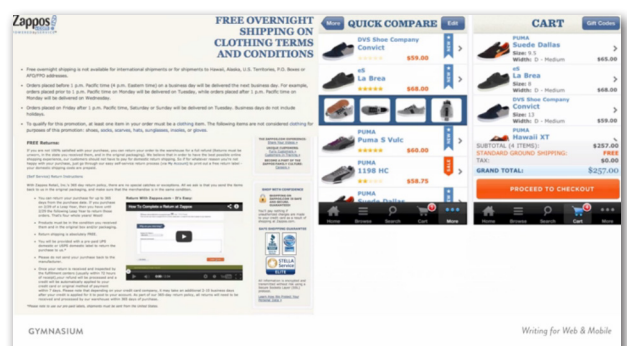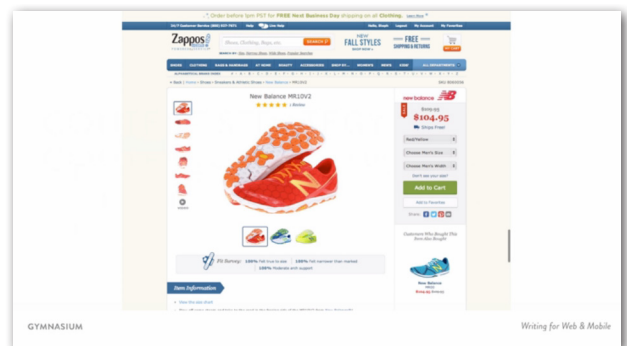
content strategy and is ensuring that what we know works and connects us with customers doesn't get lost over time, as more people are added to the process.

For example, after I make a purchase I see my order number, but I also see some fun language. "Dear Steph, Just wanted to let you know we received your order and absolutely love what you've picked." So I feel good about my purchase.

When my purchase has shipped, they say, "Guess what? Your order has shipped and is on its way. Here's your tracking number so you'll know exactly when to expect it."

This could easily be content written in a much more technical way, but it's not. The content strategy ensures that there's a singular voice, that it's clear, that it comes through in even something as simple as a shipping notification.

If something goes wrong and I need to return something, they continue the same voice. "Hello, Steph. Aw, nuts. We're sorry that didn't work out, but we'll try to make the return process super easy." That's what I want to hear as a customer. That's what helps me to feel trust and to feel loyalty toward a company.

We see that Zappos also transitions its voice to the physical products. When you receive the box, it has its values printed right on the side. Tony Hsieh, the CEO, is so confident about the role of culture in its company's growth, that he wrote a book, called Delivering Happiness, where he says that that culture has been a true path to profits, passion, and purpose. The content strategy is set as a reflection of the culture and it becomes a part of all of its interfaces.

So what is content marketing then? Well, content marketing puts into action the content strategy. It produces the reliable, authentic, direct content in more channels. Let's take a look at Moosejaw, for example. Content marketing shows up in little microcopy in every single interface you might see. For example, instead of just asking you to sign up for their newsletter, Moosejaw says, "We'll send you great discounts, contests, and a list of the best mimes in Portland. We'll give you 10% off your next order just 'cause."
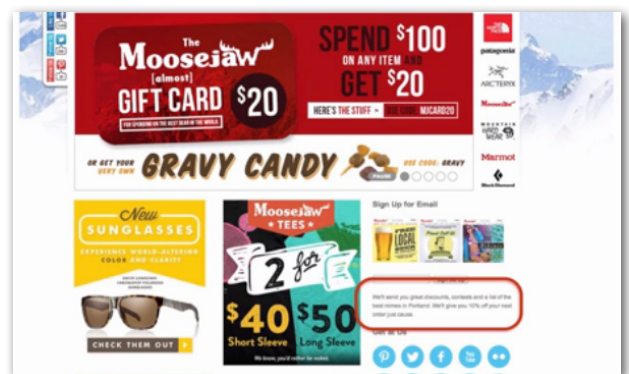
This is marketing. This is asking you for an email address. But it shows you that it's got a direct, authentic, reliable voice. As you scroll down, that same kind of voice shows up in everything, including the callouts. If we look at the product page, we see again more of the marketing. "Here's a free gift card." But they use the word "almost" in front of it, just to be funny.

"When will I get it?" They use this language instead of any sort of technical language about how shipping works. "Why buy? Since you asked..." "My mom likes these." I mean... [laughs] This is marketing. This is a fun heading that starts to display a personality. Over and over again you see this. Even "Custy Reviews," instead of "Customer Reviews."

This is the kind of language that helps to build trust between the customer and the company. When you receive an email from Moosejaw, they continue again, "Way to go. You've won the best email receipt we've sent out all day." That's the sort of language that makes you feel good, but also helps you understand who this company is.

"Thank you." Here's another receipt. "Please tell none of your friends about the great stuff you bought. We're trying to keep Moosejaw a secret." Sarcasm. This is part of this company's culture. But we know that, and it continues through all of the experiences.

Even trying to understand how the rewards points works. They say, "Our mean lawyer wants us to tell you that you earn five points for every dollar you spend on sale items."

Personality. It's authentic. The packing labels are authentic. "I put your order together all by myself." That's what this says. [Laughs]

Content marketing thinks about all of those small touches, where someone can actually have a more delightful experience and yet, at the same time, still be in line with the content strategy of the organization.

Now a key part of great content marketing is understanding whether or not this content continues to work. We knew that it worked in the beginning. We set a strategy around it. We produced a bunch of content and now, we need to measure if it is still engaging and converting the customer.

MEASURING ENGAGEMENT & CONVERSIONS

So we need to continue measuring whether or not content works. We know content is working because customers buy (or users engage or "convert"), then they tell other people. When I say "buy," I mean any action that shows an intent or a result. It's got to be measurable. So it doesn't necessarily mean buy.

Maybe it means submitting an email address. This is an example of setting a metric and measuring against it like Sesame Street did. They figured out if kids are learning from James Earl Jones by actually running tests. That's how they decided to leave three seconds in between each letter. They knew how to test it, and they measured the results.

When I say they tell other people, this is a great signal of product market fit. It's sort of the gift that keeps on giving. It's also measurable. But it's how Sesame Street continued to grow. Parents told other parents, the media started taking an interest, they started getting something like a 10% increase in viewership month over month and this was a sign that the content marketing was working.

There's quantitative data of measurement and there's also qualitative data. This is an example of a blog post that Kenneth Reitz wrote about Instapaper after Instapaper launched. In short, it's essentially a love letter. And if you're Instapaper, you're pretty excited about this. Somebody who is a user tells you exactly what problem you're solving for them. It says, "I have a bad habit of clicking open new tabs almost constantly, and I don't
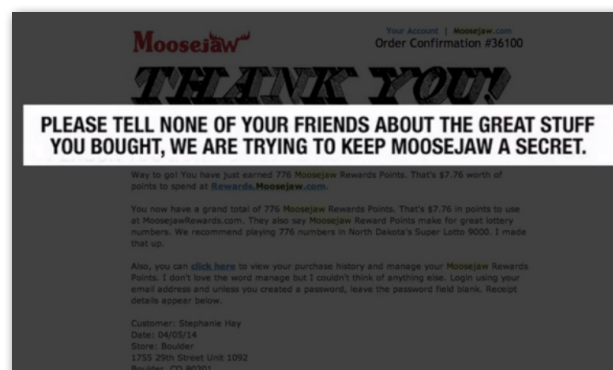
have this problem anymore thanks to Instapaper." And then he goes on further to say, "Seriously, guys. This is amazing.", and "Surely life doesn't get better than this." I mean, this is somebody who could be an evangelist for Instapaper.

For smaller companies, this is gold. This helps us understand that we're making a difference, and we need to understand who Kenneth Reitz is. In this case, who is he like? What are the kinds of problems he has? He is our target customer.
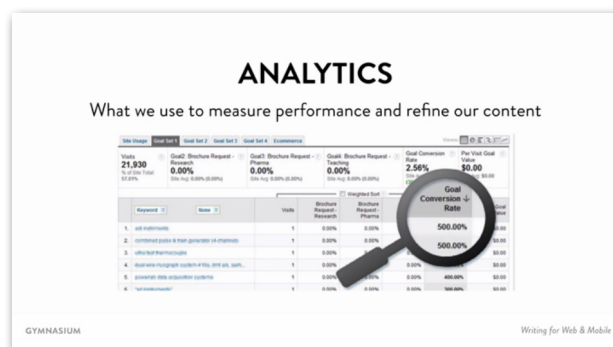
But whether you're working for a small company like a startup or a large company, analytics are your friend. It's what we use to measure performance and refine our content. We'll be digging into a lot of this in the next two lessons. But the main takeaway is it closes the loop on what we started. We understand our customer, we write better content for that customer. We set a strategy so that the organization understands what our content angle is. We produce more of it, and then we measure to figure out whether or not it's working and it starts over again. But I'm sort of getting ahead of myself on the analytics piece. We're going to get into more of that in the next lesson.

As a recap to what we've been talking about here, the main takeaway is that companies lower their risk, they know more, they learn faster, and they grow faster when they go from lean content, where they're testing what the customer wants, to content strategy, planning it for the organization, and then content marketing, actually producing what has been set in a content strategy. That's how we can see content as a conversation that transitions across time and across channels with our customers and it's a vital part of this entire course.

So how about a first exercise. What you're going to do is find an example of Lean Content. Something that is Reliable, Authentic, and Direct. Look at websites of companies you trust, people you buy from, and identify specific sentences or paragraphs that are Reliable, Authentic, and Direct. And how about some bonus points: If you're able to take an end to end journey through a single transaction or an interaction, like if you're going to go by a pair of shoes from Zappo's, think about what those content elements are that you experience through that transactional process. Or maybe sign up for a newsletter.

Think about examples beyond a website even. Maybe it's in their social feed. Maybe it's their Twitter feed, for example. Maybe it's product packaging you receive or advertising you see. Something that demonstrates the same voice that you experienced when you were actually on their website.

Once you're done with that, go ahead and put what you find in the forum. This is where we're going to be interacting through-

out this entire course. You're going to offer feedback to others and you're going to invite feedback to others and I'll be there, too. So make sure you ask your questions and post your results there.

That's it for Lesson One. Next up in Lesson Two, we're going to collect some user data before we start writing.