

INTERLUDE 1 Content Strategy

Between the first edition of *Letting Go of the Words* and this one, the words “content strategy” exploded into the web development world. The first conference devoted to content strategy was in 2010 in Paris. Now there are several around the world each year. Content strategy “meetups” gather every month in many cities. The phrase “content strategy” yields 1.5 million results in a Google search.

Of course, content strategy isn’t entirely new. It’s been a growing practice for at least a decade. And many people who now call themselves “content strategists” had been doing that work for even longer with other job titles.

Why is content strategy so important?

Content strategy

- provides your site visitors with consistent messages
- builds credibility through that consistency
- strengthens the brand
- keeps writers on purpose, on message
- keeps the web site from being cluttered with outdated and inaccurate information

What is content strategy?

Following good practice in clear writing, let’s turn the two nouns into a verb phrase:

Content strategy = thinking strategically about your content

Thinking strategically means that instead of letting everyone post whatever content they want when they want with whatever messages they want, all the content on your web site is part of your overall business plan. Content strategy also means:

Aligning your content with your business goals

More on content strategy:

Halvorson and Rach, *Content Strategy*, 2nd edition, 2012

Bloomstein, *Content Strategy at Work*, 2012

Rockley, *Managing Enterprise Content*, 2nd edition, 2012

Kissane, *The Elements of Content Strategy*, 2011

Handley and Chapman, *Content Rules*, 2011

Find a Content Strategy MeetUp near you, www.meetup.com

Content strategy brings what we talked about in Chapters 1 and 2 – focusing on the people who are conversing with you – together with a deeper look into your company or organization or yourself.

Content strategy is about governance

Content strategy means that all the content is not only created (or repurposed or revised); it is also

- planned
- coordinated
- reviewed regularly
- managed and maintained with someone in charge
- removed when it becomes outdated

Content strategy is about messages, media, style, and tone

To have a content strategy, you must answer questions like these:

- What are the organization's key messages?
- What are the key messages of each piece of content, and how does that piece fit into the overall strategy?
- What mix of media will you use?
- What style guide will you use or create?
 - How formal or informal will the writing style be? (It can all be the same, but it does not have to be. You can have different styles and tones for different groups of site visitors. You can change style and tone among your regular site, your mobile apps, your social media. Content strategy means that you plan those differences, so writers know which style to use in each case.)
 - What guidelines will you have about illustrations and other visuals? About use of video? Use of music and other audio?

Content as conversation is a strategic choice for messages, style, and tone.

Content strategy is about people, processes, and technology

Part of planning for your content is understanding roles and skills:

- Who will write? Edit? Illustrate? Produce? Publish?

- Who will be in charge of social media? How active will you be in social media groups or in engaging with people who comment on your blogs?
- Who will decide on future content and keep up the strategy?
- What skills do these people need?

It is also about how you will make the strategy work.

- How will these different people work together?
- What systems will you use?
- What training will you give people in the strategies, processes, and technology you expect them to use?

Content strategy is about purposes, personas, and scenarios

Everything in Chapters 1 and 2 goes into your content strategy.



As you develop your content strategy remember the needs of all your site visitors. Plan for both usability and accessibility.

Content strategy supports and carries out business strategy

Your content strategy must be part of an organization-wide business strategy that links all the ways you touch the people you care about (e-commerce customers, nonprofit or professional society members, citizens and visitors, etc.). That means brand strategists, business strategists, documentation strategists, marketing strategists, social media strategists, web content strategists (and probably more) all have to work together.

What does content strategy cover?

Content is everything you have on your web site:

- | | |
|-----------------|----------------------|
| • text (copy) | • PDFs |
| • illustrations | • videos |
| • charts | • podcasts |
| • graphs | • blogs |
| • tables | • forums |
| • forms | • other social media |

Develop your content strategy first, and let that drive your system choices – not the other way around! A content management system (CMS) should support and facilitate your content strategy. The CMS should not drive and constrain the strategy.

Content strategy includes all communication channels

Content is also everything you have in print, emails, social media outside of your web site (for example, Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook, Google+, recommender systems), and more. Your web site is only one of the ways you converse with your customers. Developing a content strategy for your web site may be all you can manage at first. But to be truly successful, a content strategy should include all your communication channels.

Web, print, direct-mail marketing, digital advertising, email that people sign up for, blogs, and messages through social media should all support each other and support the organization's brand values and message architecture. You may use a different mix of copy, pictures, and video in these different channels. You may use different styles and tones. But those choices should be deliberate – that's what “strategy” is all about. And “content = conversation” always applies.

“Message architecture” is Margot Bloomstein's term for your communication goals in priority order (Bloomstein, *Content Strategy at Work*, 2012).

Social media strategy is part of content strategy

As part of your content strategy, you'll want to think strategically about how you use blogs and social media:

- Who will blog? Will you take comments? Will you moderate comments? Will someone respond to comments?
- Will you invite or allow others as guests on your blogs?
- Will you place guest content on other blogs? In other places that accept user-generated content?
- What social media will you use? How will you use each?
- Will you form groups within social media? How will you use them?
- Where will the resources come from to write for, monitor, and moderate the social media that the organization participates in?
- What rules or guidelines will you give people within the organization who are responsible for or have permission to participate in these social media? For example, you might want guidelines for
 - how frequently people within the organization should post to each blog or other social media

- what topics are desired, what topics writers should avoid
- how colloquial the style can or should be in different social media

SEO |

Search engine optimization is part of content strategy

Your content strategy should include:

- guidelines for achieving the best SEO you can
- what you know at this point about relevant keywords for different parts of your content
- how you will continue to monitor how you are doing and how you will update your SEO strategy

Who does content strategy?

As with so many aspects of creating great web sites, many different backgrounds can be starting points for content strategists. People doing content strategy today have expanded their skills from being copy writers, information architects, journalists, marketing communicators, technical communicators, user experience specialists, web designers, and more.

Seven steps to carry out a content strategy

Follow these seven steps to understand the content you now have and how to get to the content you should have. These steps work at all levels. You can use them for an entire web site or suite of sites, mobile and more, for a specific part of a site, and for going beyond web and app to have a consistent content strategy for all the ways you converse with people.

1. Inventory the current content.
2. Decide on messages, media, style, and tone.
3. Start an organic style guide – and use it.
4. Create workable designs that focus on content.
5. Audit the current content – and act on the audit.

I'm concentrating here on the content itself. But don't forget that content strategy is also about governance, roles, and technology.

6. Test the strategy.
7. Plan for the future.

The first four steps don't have to be sequential. You may be working on Steps 2, 3, and 4 while you are doing Steps 1 and 5. And all of this is built on your knowledge and understanding of your purposes, your site visitors, and your site visitors' conversations.

1. Inventory the current content

You have to know what's there to know what to do with it.

One useful way to keep track of and show the inventory is a spreadsheet with columns like the following.

Columns to use for inventory

- URL
- Page title
- Short description
- URLs that link to this page
- URLs of links from this page
- Date created (if known)
- Date last updated (if known)
- Current owner (person or part of the organization)

Columns to use for auditing

- Fate (delete, move, combine, separate, edit)
- Importance (high, middle, low – to set priorities for dealing with its fate)
- Comments related to fate and importance
- Person responsible for making changes (and possibly more columns related to “who” for owner, writer, editor)
- Due date for changes
- Status (not started, in process, in review, published – or whatever stages you have set for the process)

2. Decide on messages, media, style, and tone

How do you want to converse with your site visitors?

Messages, media, style, and tone – Chapters 7–12

3. Start an organic style guide – and use it

How are you going to stay consistent on the web site – and beyond? An organic style guide starts small – with whatever decisions you have now – and grows as needed to answer questions from content contributors and editors.

Organic style guide – Interlude just after Chapter 14

4. Create workable designs that focus on content

Content is a critical part of every web page. Include real content from the earliest designs.

Design – Chapter 3

5. Audit the current content – and act on the audit

Your audit will help you answer these questions:

- How well does your current content meet your strategic goals?
- Is it on target with the messages you want to feature?
- Is it organized well for site visitors?
- Does it answer site visitors' questions?

To act on your audit, you'll decide what content to

- delete because it is not needed, is outdated, or duplicates other content
- move because it fits better into a different part of the information architecture
- combine with other pages
- separate what is now together into shorter pages
- edit because it is good information but needs better organization and clearer writing to

- meet site visitors' needs
- achieve better SEO
- engage site visitors more

You'll also identify gaps for which you need new content.

To make those decisions, you'll use your business goals, personas, and their conversations. You'll also use information that you glean from

- usability testing
- web analytics
- SEO analysis, site search analytics, and possibly conversion optimization analysis (figuring out how best to get people to convert from lookers to bookers, browsers to shoppers, readers to subscribers)

Once you know what needs to be done with the content, you have to arrange logistics – people, schedules, budgets, technology – so that you get from the content you have to the content you need.

As you move from inventory through audit, create a content map (the information architecture of the site). And, of course, you must then use, revise, and create the content based on your audit.

6. Test the strategy

When you do usability testing of your site, you are in fact testing your content strategy – or your lack of a content strategy.

7. Plan for the future

Business goals may change. New messages may become critical. You may want to reach new groups. Information may become outdated. Media will continue to evolve. For all these reasons, you'll want a regular review schedule for your content strategy.

More on information architecture: Morville and Rosenfeld, *Information Architecture for the World Wide Web*, 3rd edition, 2006

Usability testing – Chapter 15

A final note: Be realistic.
Consider resources – time and people. Will you really be able to write a blog article every day? Every week? How often will you really post to social media sites?