Content! Content! Content!

1

The theme of this book is content = conversation. My goal is to help you have great conversations through your web site, mobile app, social media, and whatever future innovations encourage interactions between you and others.

People come for the content

People don't come to web sites or mobile apps or social media for the joy of navigating or searching. They don't usually come to admire the design. They don't focus on the technology. They come for the content that they think (or hope) is there.

People come for information that answers their question or helps them complete their task. They want that information to be easy to find, easy to understand, accurate, up to date, and credible.

Effective navigation and search are critical.

Clear and usable design is critical.

Technology that works well is critical.

But these three legs of the stool don't stand by themselves.

Navigation, search, design, and technology support the content. The stool needs a seat to be useful and usable.

Content = conversation

Every use of your web site or mobile app is a conversation started by your site visitor.

That's true whether your site or app is for e-commerce; a nonprofit organization; a government agency; a university; a city, county, state, or country; a recommender system; or your personal blog or site.

Yesterday, I

- looked up the same health question on three different sites to build confidence that I was getting an answer I could trust
- bought a book for my daughter
- compared prices for a new printer for the office
- skimmed hotel reviews for a trip my husband and I are planning
- sent a huge file through an online service

In each case, the most productive way to think about what I was doing is as a conversation.

We converse both by talking and by writing. You may text others more often than you call them. You're still conversing with them.

I need to send a large file.

No problem. Just do it here on my home page.

Send a File *Try it now*

From:
Your email address

To:
Separate multiple emails with commas

SELECT FILE

▶ **Subject** *(Optional)*
▶ **Message** *(Optional)*

Pay-per-use options:
☐ Premium Delivery ($9.99)
▶ More

Preview what your recipient will see.

SEND IT

By clicking on the 'SEND IT' button, you agree to YouSendIt's Terms of Service.

www.yousendit.com

Yesterday, I also

- tweeted about my next workshop
- checked my Twitter stream to see what others were saying
- caught up with a former colleague through LinkedIn
- participated in a global committee meeting on Skype
- read a few of my favorite blogs

Isn't social media all about conversations?

Do you react well when web sites and mobile apps converse with you? I do. Figure 1-1 is the message I get when I leave my Twitter stream open but get caught up in my work.

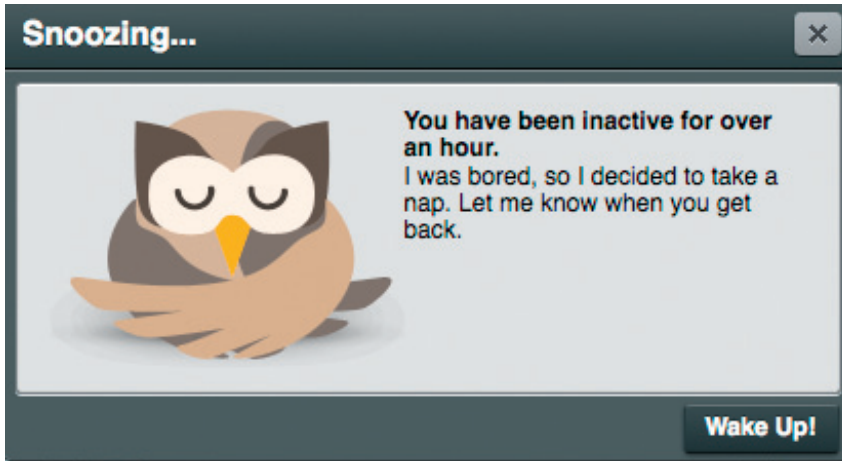**Figure 1-1**   A conversational message from the site I use to read and send tweets
www.hootsuite.com

Web = phone, not file cabinet

Too many sites still seem to be virtual file cabinets, saying to site visitors, "We'll let you rummage around in our file cabinets because we assume you are looking for documents." "File cabinet" is the wrong metaphor for most web sites.

Web = phone (whether you use it for voice or for texting). Web = asking people to serve themselves instead of calling or writing.

File cabinets house documents. We use phones to converse. People seldom come to web sites for documents. They come for information. They come because they have questions. And they are happiest when the web site answers those questions.

To create great web content, you must

- understand the conversations your site visitors want to have with your web site or your app
- satisfy those conversations

- engage your site visitors enough to make them want to continue in the site or app and come back again
- meet your business goals (whether your goal is to sell stuff, to be the major source of information on your topic, or to get more members for your organization)

Online, people skim and scan

Most site visitors are very busy people who want to read only as much as they need to satisfy the goal that brought them to your web site.

We hurry from the home page through pathway (landing, gallery, navigation) pages, reading as little as possible. We jump at the first item in a search results page. Even on an information page, we often skim and scan first to find just what we came for.

Nielsen and Loranger, *Prioritizing Web Usability*, 2006: On average, people in their study left the home page within 30 seconds.

Why? Because we are focused on our own conversation – on the goal that brought us to the site. Navigation and search may be necessary to get there, but that's not where we want to spend time reading.

Home pages – Chapter 4
Pathway pages – Chapter 5

People do read online – sometimes

Do people ever read on web sites and in apps? Of course we do. We read when we find what we came for – the answer to our question, information for the task we came to complete, sometimes labels on the form we are filling out.

On forms as conversations – and everything else about how to create great web forms: Jarrett and Gaffney, *Forms that Work*, 2008

We read social media messages, blog articles, news that interests us. We read to do. We read to learn. We read for fun.

Note, however, how much of this reading is "functional." In this book, I'm not talking about novels, poetry, or games on the web. I'm not

talking about the entertainment part of entertainment sites. I am primarily talking about being able to quickly find and understand when the local movie theater is showing the film we want to see or how much it will cost to see a favorite band's next concert.

I'm talking about e-commerce sites, information-rich sites, nonprofit sites, blogs and social media, e-learning, and the information parts of web and mobile applications.

People don't read more because …

- We are too busy.
- What we find is not relevant to what we need.
- We are bombarded with information and are sinking under information overload.

Writing well = having successful conversations

Good web writing

- answers your site visitors' questions
- lets your site visitors "grab and go" when that's what they want to do
- encourages further use – now or on a return visit
- markets successfully to your site visitors
- improves search engine optimization (SEO)

- improves internal search
- is accessible to all

All those aspects of good web writing are critical because that's the way that you meet your business goals. In this book, I show you how to do all of this. For now, let's just look briefly at each aspect.

Answer your site visitors' questions

On many sites, people come with questions. Answer those questions and you'll have a successful web site.

I'm not advocating making your entire site one large set of frequently asked questions (FAQs). That would be disaster. No one would find what they need.

What I am advocating: For every topic on your site, think about what people come wanting to know about that topic. And then think about how to give them that information as clearly and concisely as possible.

Let your site visitors "grab and go"

Site visitors often want to just *grab* what they need and *go* on to look up their next question, do their next task, make a decision, get back to work, or do whatever comes next for them. You can help site visitors grab and go by

- breaking your text into short sections with clear headings
- starting with your key messages
- writing short sentences and short paragraphs
- using lists and tables
- writing meaningful links
- illustrating your content

Encourage further use

Do you want people to stay on your site? Read other blog articles you've written? Buy more? Come back often?

Clear, concise content that answers people's questions doesn't have to be boring. Tone and style can help you engage site visitors. Making it easy to find related information can keep site visitors on your site. But the most important element of engagement is satisfying the need that brought the customer to your site. Successful experiences make people return.

Market successfully to your site visitors

Whether you are marketing goods, services, information, or memberships, think about the difference between direct mail or email advertising and the web.

- With mail (paper or online), you start the conversation.
- For your web site or app, your site visitor starts the conversation.
- Despite the time and money spent to build it, your site or app "exists" only when someone chooses to go to it. And that changes everything. You have to satisfy what your site visitor came for first. Then you can cross-sell or up-sell.

Marketing on the web – Interlude 2 after Chapter 7

Improve search engine optimization (SEO)

SEO |

Search engine optimization (SEO) means making sure your web site comes up high in the list of nonpaid ("organic") results at Bing, Google, Yahoo, and other search engines. Much of what I am helping you with in *Letting Go of the Words* will also improve SEO for your site.

For tips on SEO, look for the SEO icon throughout the book.

A note about SEO

The SEO advice that you'll find throughout the book is true now at the time I'm writing it. But search engines change their algorithms frequently, so check for the latest specifics at each search engine and in the major blogs about SEO.

Also, I touch only on points about SEO that are relevant to writing the content. SEO covers more than that – another reason for checking other sources about SEO.

What isn't going to change is that the most important key to good SEO is having great content – content that people want; content that includes the words people use when they search; content that people want to share and that other sites want to link to. Every search engine starts its SEO guidelines with this point: Write for people, not for the search engine.

A useful blog to follow for changes in SEO:
www.searchengineland.com

Improve internal search

Getting people to your site is only part of a successful experience. Having them find what they need easily on the site is also critical. Writing clearly *with the words that your site visitors use* is the key to internal search success as well as to success at external search engines.

On how to analyze and learn from what your site visitors search for: Rosenfeld, *Search Analytics for Your Site*, 2011

Be accessible to all

AAA
ACCESS

In the United States, somewhere between 36 million and 54 million people have a disability. About 7 million people have vision problems – and this number is growing as the population ages.

Is yours an e-commerce site? These people have money to spend. Are you missing out on having them as customers?

Is yours an information-rich site? Don't you want everyone to benefit from your information?

In the United States, all federal government web sites and any site paid for with federal government money must be accessible to all. Many other countries also require that web sites work for everyone. Think of all your potential site visitors as you design, develop, and write your web site or app.

For advice on how to make your site or app universally usable, look for the accessibility icon throughout the book.

U.S. statistics:
www.disabilitystatistics.org
www.aahd.us

U.K. statistics:
http://odi.dwp.gov.uk/disability-statistics-and-research/

Information about many countries:
www.w3.org/WAI/policy

Information about U.S. law:
www.section508.gov

Universal guidelines:
www.w3.org/WAI

Book on why and how to make sites accessible: Shawn Lawton Henry, *Just Ask*, http://uiaccess.com/

Three case studies

Content as conversation is a useful mantra for all types of sites. Let's close the chapter with three cases:

- Mint.com where the writers anticipate site visitors' questions at every step of the conversation
- eBags.com where each product page holds great conversations with almost no text
- A city's site where the text is not at all conversational when it should be – and I'll show you how I would rewrite it

Mint.com allows you to keep all your financial information in one place and helps you budget and plan – all for free.
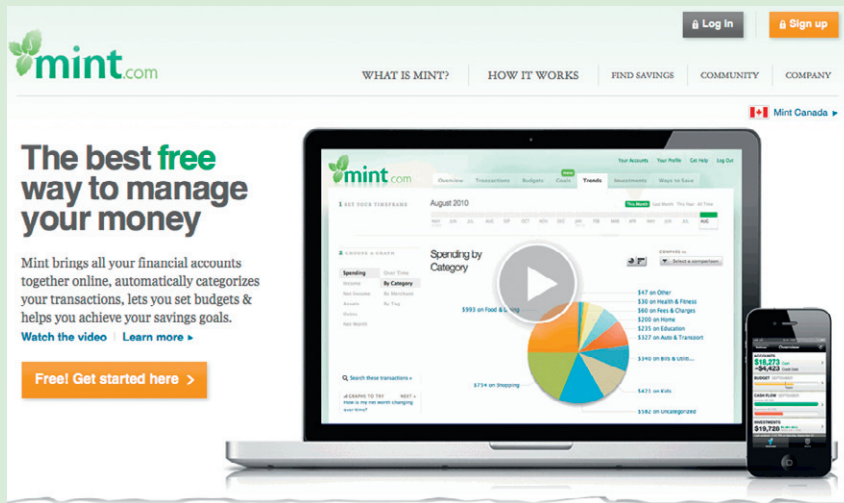
The home page looks clean and fresh (like mint candy – the name is a wonderful double entendre of mint for where money is made, and mint, a refreshing plant). The tag line is vibrant and compelling – the best way to manage your money (and by the way, it's free). Notice how conversational all the writing is on this page: lets you set budgets; helps you achieve your savings goals.

But remember that it's always the site visitor who starts the conversation.

The writers at Mint.com anticipated this conversation from Lisa and Bob. The very first link after the name is What is Mint?
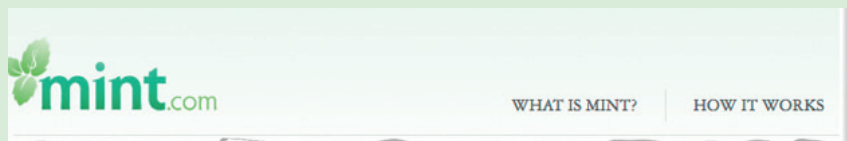
When Lisa clicks on What is Mint? she gets a short, quick answer. (In Chapter 7, you'll see this as a "bite" or "snack" – key message right up front.) And she gets the answers to her follow-on question: Why should I sign up?
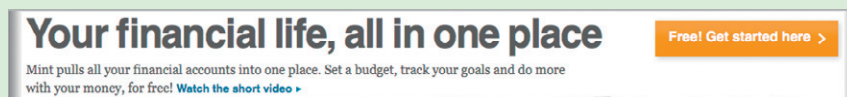
Lisa and Bob are intrigued, so they skim down the page. But when they see that Mint is going to automatically capture all their financial data, they become worried.
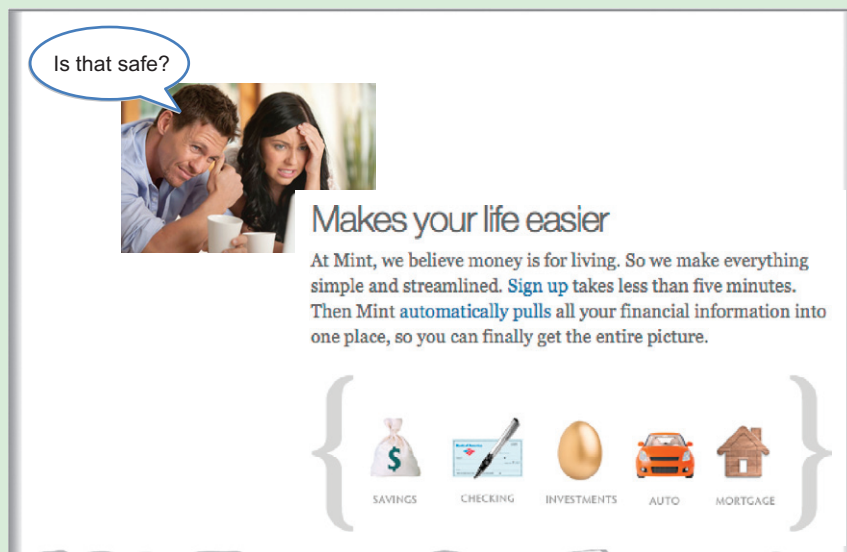
The Mint.com writers "heard" that question. They acknowledge Lisa and Bob's worry with a section on safe and secure further down the page.

And that makes Lisa and Bob feel good about Mint.com.
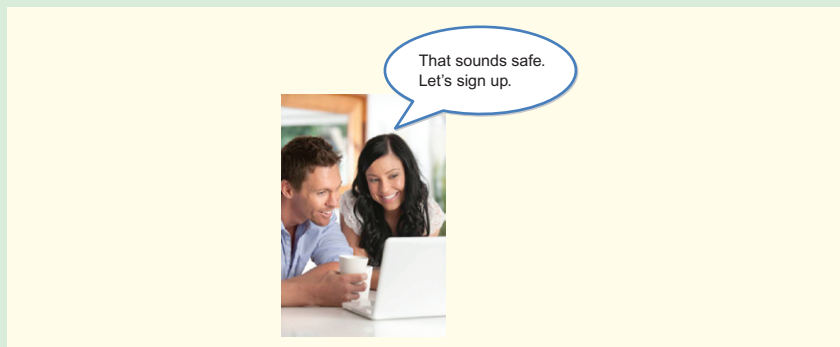
This conversational approach – anticipating and answering site visitors' questions – has worked well for Mint.com. Within two years of launch, the site had more than 1.5 million users, managed $50 billion in assets, and helped people track nearly $200 billion in purchases (numbers from http://www.mint.com/history/). And now Mint is part of the Intuit family. Intuit (maker of Quicken, Quickbooks, TurboTax, etc.) has always followed the mantra of product as conversation.

| Case Study 1-2 | Conversing well with few words |

eBags.com wants you to buy from them. But site visitors probably have a number of questions about each bag they look at.

No problem. eBags.com has anticipated what site visitors might ask. The site answers all of Paula's questions and more on each product page.

Wow! So much conversation – in so few words! Great customer support in the content. No need to call and ask. The web page is conversing well with eBags' customers. The catalog writers and designers might not have thought of their content as conversation, but that's exactly what it is and why it works so well.

And it works. eBags.com has been the #1 online bag retailer since 1999 (claim at www.ebags.com home page).

Case Study 1-3	Revising web words

Not all sites are as good at conversation as Mint and eBags. If yours is not yet, you may find this example helpful about what not to do and how to fix it.

The situation

Many cities and counties allow residents to participate at meetings of the city or county council or the local school board.

The current site

This city puts the agenda for its meetings online with these instructions.

What's your reaction to the writing in these paragraphs? Is it inviting? Engaging? As clear as it could be?

What's wrong with this version?

- The information comes too late. (It's Item #14, but you have to have turned in a Request to Speak card before the meeting starts. How many people study all the items on the agenda before a meeting?)

- Instructions are buried in paragraphs.

- It doesn't talk *to* people.

- Information about how long you have comes before information on what this is all about and what you have to do.

- It does not answer a critical question: Where do I get a Request to Speak card?

How can we do better?

1. Get the answer for the missing information.

2. Rewrite it all as lists and as conversation.

3. Move the information so people see it before the meeting and so it is also at the top of a handout people get when they first enter the meeting room.

What might a revision look like?

The title connects to what the site visitor wants to do.

To converse well, we must tell people where to get the card to fill out.

This version makes it clear *when* someone must act.

Instructions are in separate steps.

Bulleted items are easy to grasp quickly.

The information answers people's questions.

If you want to speak at the meeting

Before the meeting starts

1. Get a Request to Speak card from *need to find out where*
2. Fill it out.
3. Give it to the President **before** the meeting starts.

Notes

- Time limit for each speaker: 3 minutes
- Time limit per topic: 20 minutes
- **Item on the agenda**? Your turn to speak will come when the Board is discussing that item.
- **Item not on the agenda**? Your turn to speak will come under Item 14 "Comments from the Floor."

Summarizing Chapter 1

Key messages from Chapter 1:

- People come to web sites to satisfy goals, to do tasks, to get answers to questions.
- Navigation, search, design, and technology support the content that people come for.
- The best metaphor for the web is phone, not filing cabinet.
- Every use of your web site is a conversation started by your site visitor.
- Social media is pushing the web to be even more conversational.
- To have good conversations through your web site:
  - Answer your site visitors' questions throughout your web content, not only in sections called frequently asked questions.
  - Let your site visitors "grab and go."
  - Engage your site visitors.
  - Market successfully to your site visitors by first satisfying the conversation they came to have.
  - Improve search engine optimization (SEO) and internal site search.
  - Be accessible to all.