Content Strategy for Startups. The Essential Guide

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You know that great content will help your users understand your product and get excited about it. You're pretty sure that it will make you money by turning site visitors into customers. And you know that curated content trumps more content. The only thing is you don't have the time or expertise to develop a content strategy plan in-house.

This is where I come in. My name is Hannah Adcock and I'm going to talk you through some of the tools of our trade. It's time to make your content work harder – so you don't have to.

List of contents

What is content strategy?

It's just marketing right? Or zooped up copywriting? Not exactly. Content Strategy:

> "guides your plans for the creation, delivery and governance of content"
> – Kristina Halvorson.

Some content strategists also create content – like me – but this isn't obligatory or even all that usual. Content marketing, in contrast, is:

> "a marketing technique of creating and distributing relevant and valuable content to attract, acquire, and engage a clearly defined and understood target audience — with the objective of driving profitable customer action." — Joe Pulizzi.

Marketers implement content strategies – they don't necessarily create them. They build relationships, rather than repeatable frameworks.

I'm not saying that one is 'better' than the other or that there isn't any overlap. There clearly is – as there is with information architecture and user experience. However, my particular interest is content strategy because it makes you think seriously about these questions:

- why are you publishing this content
- how
- for whom
- what happens later down the line?

And if you think seriously about these questions you are less likely to end up with lumps of content that seemed like a good idea at the time but don't support key business goals or meet user need.

Do I need content strategy?

I think that all companies – from early stage startups to multinationals – can benefit from thinking strategically about their content. However, this guide is specifically aimed at post-early stage startups that want to use content to grow their business, whether they are boostrapped or funded.

Early tech stage startups may feel that it's enough to have a basic, high-converting website and to use adverts to drive traffic to it. I've heard several growth experts suggests this is a good use of resources – fair enough.

What do content strategists do?

In terms of deliverables, here are a few things we do that can help startups:

Create content templates

You can create content templates for all types of pages, although I'm going to concentrate on blogs. If you are running a blog you need to produce content that is search engine optimised, findable, looks good on different viewports and can be promoted effectively on different social media platforms. To do this, you'll need a content template that includes sections like these:

- a few different headlines, preferably at least a short and a longer version
- a short teaser
- a long teaser
- a metadescription
- a tweet or two
- tags
- keywords
- pull out quotes
- a list of images
- an image that will work well on social media
- a list of any images that won't work on a mobile so you'll need to serve up a cropped version
- a suggestion for the URL that is SEO optmised
- a body section including a number of short (1-3 sentence) paragraphs

So, why should I bother? Content templates mean you are more likely to produce consistent, well-structured, findable, sharable and search engine optimised content. They also make it easier for you to work with freelancers.

Create a content inventory and/or audit

A **content inventory** is an organised list of your content including as much information about each piece of content as possible. A **content audit** is a qualitative tool that helps you figure out whether those content pieces are any good.

So, why should you bother A content inventory basically let's you know what content you're dealing with. Even if you have a small website, it's amazing how quickly you forget what's on some of your pages and/or begin to take your website for granted (it's familiar; therefore it's ok). A content inventory includes basic things like:

- ID (identification number for each piece of content)
- page title
- URL
- format (text, pictures, video, and so on)
- links from/to the page

A content audit let's you see what content is performing and what isn't. It includes extra things like:

- last update
- traffic/usage statistics
- accuracy
- usablity
- actionability

. . . and so on. For some of these categories you could use a ratings sacle of 1-5 from rubbish to totally awesome.

Once you've done an audit/inventory you can make some quick(ish) wins by:

- improving underperforming content that has a lousy click through rate/bounce rate or obvious messaging flaws
- getting a useful heads up on what content is engaging users so you can create more content in a similiar vein

You can also do a **gap analysis**, which basically involves looking at what content you have on your website and then working out what content is missing – for example, are you strong on knowledge base articles, but not so good on outward-facing articles that explain to potential customers how your product features will help them?

If you're really getting into this auditing stuff, you can also do a **competitor analysis**, which let's you learn from your competitors, avoid their mistakes and spot areas where you can really differentiate yourself. For example, if your competitor's website is a bit Silicon Valley Startup 101 then maybe you can market your business as a bit more edgy/amusing/authentic and so on. Equally, if your competitor's pricing plans are based on a % cut and yours is based on a set pricing plan consider which customers your approach would appeal to – and target them with your adverts, landing pages, blog posts and social media.

Undertake a **competitor analysis** with an open mind though. Not everything your competitors do is lousy!

Determine a message architecture

According to content stratgeist Margot Bloomstein:

> "A message architecture is a hierarchy of communication goals; as a hierarchy, they're attributes that appear in order of priority, typically in an outline."

So, why should you bother?   A message architecture helps you develop a cohesive, consistent and even enjoyable user experience. You can't be everything to all people – and you shoulnd't be. So how do you want to be perecived? As:

- Enduring, experienced and diverse
- Reliable, secure and helpful
- Friendly, customer-orientated and straighforward?

. . . or something completely different? Just be careful that you *show* that you are x, y and z through your design, tone and voice, choice of images and so on though, rather than telling your customers that you are 'reliable and care about quality', for example, and then pulling in all kinds of low-quality content through an RSS feed, which suggests the opposite!

You can establish a message architecture in a number of ways, including 'card-sorting', through a Venn diagram or through a big argument fuelled by too much coffee (not recommended). For more information I'd suggest having a look at Margot Bloomstein's excellent book *Content Strategy at Work.*

Note that a message architecture is different from brand values – the latter is more an internal memo, the former are about how you communicate with your target audience – they are actionable.

Compile a style guide

This is a set of guidelines and standards covering areas such as tone, voice, vocabulary and editing. Good style guides tend to have lots of examples (see A List Apart's [style guide][http://alistapart.com/about/style-guide])

If there is a particular style guide that you like, you can always refer to that and then just write a short supplementary style guide that targets issues of particular relevance to your company.

So, why should you bother?   Well, if you want to communicate that you are offering a premium, exclusive service then you probably want to make sure that your copy is elegant and slightly highbrow, rather than cheeky and conversational.

You probaby want to avoid slang and abbreviations. You might favour the Oxford comma because you'll be using quite a few lists. You might prefer American English because most of your clients are in America. In contrast, if you are selling a security-type product or service to companies then you probably want your copy to be slightly terse, maybe a bit technical. Your sentence length might be shorter; maybe you use more bullet points rather than in-line lists. And so on.

It also just looks a bit unprofessional if your use of language isn't consistent, and it can seriously undermine your message architecture. For example, if a customer is browsing one page of your website that is written in a conversational tone and then clicks through to a page where the language is suddenly much more formal, what will they think? That your business is. . . slightly schizophrenic? Or perhaps that you can't be bothered to pay attention to detail? Even if they don't consciously notice the change in tone/voice, they will be left with a slightly fuzzy impression of your company. And this makes you easy to forget, particularly when your competitor offers a much more branded experience, in terms of design, copy and visuals.

Style guides can be as large or as small as you need them to be – and this depends on the expertise of your writers. Good web writers probably don't need tips on web writing – just the useful stuff about tone and voice. Newbie writers might need more help. In which case get them to read: *Letting Go of the Words: Writing Web Content that Works* by Janice (Ginny) Redish.

Construct an editorial calendar

To return to Margot Bloomstein:

> "An editorial calendar lays out the plan for how the experience will continue to change over time: who will do what, where, and at what frequency? It often addresses the complete web experience, not just the site, as it can span thematic updates to -all- channels."

So, why should you bother? It's easy to get caught up creating a blog post, or an advert or managing a Twitter conversation, but it's always helpful if you know what's up next. You will grow your business by planning to create good, relevant content over the longer term. A one-off blog post, no matter how good, will only achieve so much.

Editorial calendars, I think, are also good for morale. You see what's going to happen in the future (Huzzah! You have a future!) as well as reminding you what you've accomplished in the past. You can also use an editorial calendar to appraise past content and see what is evergreen, so can possibly be repackaged or at least referred back to, as well as what is time sensitive, in which case it will need archiving or editing.

You can create an okay editorial calendar using Markdown (as a table) and committ to Github. Or there are lots of spreadsheet templates online. If you hate tables/spreadsheets then you could always try an organisational tool like Asana or Trello. Whatever works for you. Useful categories in a spreadsheet might include:

- publication date
- content type
- persona (more on these in a minute)
- working title
- state
- notes
- pictures
- popularity (to be filled in retrospectively)

Research user personas

To quote author, instructor and consultant Ginny Redish:

> A persona is an individual with a name, a picture, specific demographics, and other characteristics. A persona is, however, not usually based on one actual individual. Rather, each personas is a composite of characteristics or real people in the group the persona represents

You can use personas to breathe life into the information that you've gathered about your site visitors. And if you haven't any information on your site visitors then get gathering! Your support queue, contact us email, social media, analytics and site search logs are a good place to start.

What makes up a persona?

- name
- age
- family status
- gender
- education level
- main tasks they complete on your website
- main information they want from your website

So, why should you bother? If your customers are people like you then congratulations, you're very lucky. It will be fairly easy to work out what they need. However, if your customers are not like you, or your company has a number of different types of customers, then ideally you need to work out what they

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need – rather than guess! Then you can produce focused content that appeals to your customers rather than any old content that might not. I always think about what persona or personas I'm writing for when I produce a new piece of content. This way I remain focused on who I'm writing for as well as where I should promote that content.

Mock-up wireframes

Wireframes are, to quote content strategist Richard Ingram:

> A simplified representation of a web page or an application screen that illustrates and describes its proposed information and structure, as well as its functional behaviors.

So, why should I bother?   Working from the premise that content is pretty much anything meaningful on the page, it's probably best to sort out content first on any new web page before you decide what colour of button you want and whether you really need to use Javascript. Wireframes can just be sketches on a piece of card with real if rather hard-to-read copy. Or you can wireframe online.

How do I get good content?

This is often a tricky issue for startups. You know you need good content, as you need good design, good accountancy advice and good developers, but how do you go about getting it?

Your options

Aggregate content   This is a feasible option if you want to access plentiful, cheap content. Just be aware that quality content that works for your organisation probably isn't going to be spotted by an algorithm. That doesn't mean don't do it: just make sure you have a human curating it.

Get your users to generate content   Huzzah! It's free! Well, kind of. The issue here is that you still need someone from your organistion to set the tone and curate the content. Otherwise you might end up with zilch, or with stuff that's unhelpful. To encourage (positive) user content you could encourage people with special offers, or with the promise of a link to their blog or whatever it is they want to promote. Then be really grateful that they've taken the time to help you.

You'll write the content   If you're a good writer and you know web writing best practice, or have the time to learn, then go for it. My only word of warning would be that as a company founder you'll probably have about a million other things you should be doing. So it might be more cost effective to pay a professional copywriter or marketing agency to create content while you get on with developing your business. If you're not a good writer (and let others be the judge!) then consider employing a copywriter. You'll feel a bit queasy if you get people to your website through advertising or sheer force of personality only for them to bounce off because they don't really understand your copy or just find it a bit 'meh'.

Let's pay a student/someone from India/my mate down the road Can't you just pay someone $10 for a blog post – or even $4? Of course you can. If you are lucky, it might even be decent content. Just bear in mind that your content should differentiate you from your competitors, inform and entertain customers and generally make you look like the kind of company that someone wants to throw their money at. If your content doesn't do this it's overpriced, even at $4, because it's stopping customers getting to good content, perhaps even annoying them, and doing nothing for you in terms of SEO because no one wants to share it or talk about it. This point is also relevant if you choose to employ an inexperienced marekting intern. If you really can't afford to pay much for content either produce less, spend time looking around for a gem of writer who is miraculously also cheap, or spend time training your intern. I'll include a list of books and resources in the index section of this guide.

Okay, let's pay a freelance copywriter   If you find a good freelance copywriter you'll get good content that informs and entertains customers and that they might even want to share (huzzah!). The downside is that you'll still need to spend time, particuarly at the beginning, making sure that your freelancer knows enough about your company to produce relevant content. You'll also need to keep checking in with them so that they remain up to date with what you company is up to – and can come up with good ideas based on this information. Perhaps you can ask them to attend a monthly meeting in person or schedule a weekly Skype call?

Working with freelancers

If you want a long and happy relationship with a freelance writer, then consider giving them:

- a style guide
- an outline of your message architecture
- a content template

- user personas or at least some guidance on who they are writing for

In addition, get them involved in helping you shape an editorial calendar. Also make sure you have a conversation about workflow. To prevent version control issues use a collaborative writing tool like GoogleDocs or Draft. Or use a Markdown-supporting text editor and get your content producers to committ to a private repo in Github (although you'll be lucky to find a copywriter than knows Markdown/HTML/Github).

How do I spot a good freelancer? If you like a copywriter's portfolio then that's a really good start. You might also look for:

- some experience of web writing
- an ability to write in different styles (avoid bloggers who can only write in their own style)
- enough interest in the job that they look at your website and make relevant suggestions
- enough knowledge that they might bring up style, audience and workflow in your conversation
- a decent grasp of web writing best practice
- customer testimonials or similar

If you think you might struggle to 'spot' a good copywriter, perhaps because English is your second language, you're just not that into words or you're more familiar with print journalism, you could do some swotting up yourself on how to write web content that works. Ginny Redish's book *Web Writing that Works* is the best book on the subject, possibly complemented by *Don't Make Me Think* by Steve Krug.

You could also ask a few friends and colleagues to give you an opinion on the writer's portfolio and style. Ideally, also ask a few of your customers or potential customers (or people like your potential customers!) to give you their opinion. After all, your copywriter will be writing for your customers, not for you.

Where do I find a good freelancer? You could try online marketplaces or companies like elance or scripted.com. Social media can work too, particularly LinkedIn. Many copywriters also have websites, although you might need to click through quite a few pages of google to get to the independents. Personal recommendation is usually a great bet.

Create a content strategy in a week

You're interested in content strategy but you're busy people. Understood. However, you can achieve a surprising amount in a week:

Monday

- Initial discussion about what content your company is creating, who is doing it, and why
- Discuss your customer research and create user personas

Tuesday

- Discuss content themes – which personas are you going to target this month?
- Create content calendar for this month, and preferably a few months in advance as well

Wednesday

- Create content template (for example, a blog template)
- Begin to build a style guide and brand cues documents

Thursday

- Discuss who'll write this month's content
- Discuss how you'll promote this month's content and who will be responsible
- Undertake a content inventory or audit, if you have time

Friday

- Decide how you'll measure the success of your content efforts (your KPIs)
- Discuss your content audit/inventory and see if you can make any quick fixes/quick wins next week
- Go to the pub

Further reading

I've only included a list of books because I'm confident that these are good, findable resources. However, you can always follow the author on social media – they'll often pick up on useful blog posts – and browse their websites. There's also a very good content strategy group on GooglePlus and a slightly less useful one on LinkedIn.

Web writing and web content *Letting Go of the Words: Writing Web Content that Works* by Janice (Ginny) Redish *Clout: The Art and Science of Influential Web Content* by Colleen Jones *Don't Make me Think* by Steve Krug

Content strategy *Content Strategy at Work: Real-world Stories to Strengthen every Interactive Project* by Margot Bloomstein *Content Strategy for the Web* (second edition) by Kristina Halvorson and Melissa Rach *Content Strategy for Mobile* by Karen McGrane *The Elements of Content Strategy* by Erin Kissane *The Language of Content Strategy* by Scott Abel and Rahel Anne Bailie

User experience *Undercover User Experience Design: Learn how to do great UX work with tiny budgets, no time, and limited support* by Cennydd Bowles and James Box