Content Strategy for Startups and Small Businesses. The Essential Guide.

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Many startups and small growing businesses overlook the importance of content, because they are focused on other matters. But content is essential to communicating your product, and reducing the cost of servicing your customers. Content strategy will help you make the most of your content. It is "the practice of planning for the creation, delivery, and governance of useful, usable content" (Kristina Halvorson). It can stop you worrying that you don't have the 'right' content or 'enough' content. Done well, it drives traffic to your website and makes you money through improved branding, social engagement, usability and SEO.

List of contents

What problems can content strategy help you tackle?

1. We want to grow faster and we think good content might help

Done well, content can help you position yourself as an authority on your subject, reinforce your credibility and even help you reinvent your brand. However, if you just want to invent yourself on a tight budget then what you want is *lean* content.

Solution: lean content If you've already read *The Lean Startup* by Eric Ries, you'll probably be familiar with this approach. If not, I'll summarise: the lean approach is about learning what your customers really want, testing your vision continuously, adapting and adjusting before it's too late.

By being scientific about what content you produce, rather than producing as many tweets, blogs, 'how to' articles and YouTube videos as possible, you can make the most return on your investment. Here are a few ways you can make the most of your limited resources by using lean content:

Test content ideas before creating (more) content Test messages that resonate with your customers before writing content – you can do this by running a short Google AdWords or Facebook advertising campaign and seeing what copy gets people clicking through. You can also see which of your tweets and posts get the most traction and consider creating content on a similar theme. Or measure which pieces of content on your website have led people into your sales funnel using Google Analytics, KISSmetrics or similar, and consider creating more content around that theme.

Work out who you are writing for before creating content Write content with a particular type of customer in mind – rather than trying to write for everyone who uses your product. If you aren't sure who your users are consider creating a survey or organising some user interviews to find out.

Make sure your users can read your content before creating more Optimise your content for different viewports, so you're not wasting resources producing content that people don't want to read because they have to pinch & zoom or squint. Also considering a/b testing different layouts – there's no

point refining your call to action on a landing page if people get distracted by a carousel and don't really see it.

Consider repurposing content rather than creating expensive new content Perhaps turn a blog post into a slide deck or a few posts into a product guide targeted at one of your customer segments. You might also consider curating content sourced either from your own customer base or from online sources (also see: 9. How do we get good content when we don't have a copywriter on the team?).

2. Our app design is great but users are getting stuck on certain tasks

Microcopy is the unsung hero of your app (or indeed your website). It's the labels on a form field, tiny pieces of instructional text, words on a button, field labels, error messages and confirmation text that can make the difference between a conversion and a confused customer. If you're doubtful of its significance, read Jared M. Spool's article on how a small change to microcopy earned one company an extra $300 million revenue in a year.

Solution: User testing If you're working in a rapid prototyping environment then don't pass up the chance to test your microcopy as well as your user interface and your product. This way you'll pick up any copy that makes perfect sense to you, but might be misunderstood in the world outside your office or garage. Use the actual words that your customers will use. So – get to know your customers. Listen when they say they don't get something.

Some microcopy tips:

Microcopy doesn't just need to be functional Do take the chance to inject some personality into success messages, reward notifications, 404 pages, server messaging and similar. This can help customers feel comfortable with your product or service so they want to use it, and recommend it to friends. Just don't let personality get in the way of a user trying to perform an action, and tone down your branding when your user might be angry.

Use the same language as your customers Don't expect a user to know what an in-house acronym means – and don't use them in your navigation. Similarly, don't assume that users will know what an icon means on your app. Consider supporting an icon with microcopy.

Use microcopy to guide users through formatting issues   We've all been there when we've entered our phone number and an unhelpful error message comes up – even though we know the phone number is correct. If you need information formatted in a certain way use microcopy to show people an example and to help them when they go wrong.

Use microcopy to pre-emptively tackle user anxieties   If you can soothe people's anxeties before they get the better of them, then you'll see more email signups and fewer drops offs during checkout. Some common user anxieties include: that you'll spam them or send them too many emails if they part will their email; that they'll need to set up an account to complete their purchase using Paypal; that they will have to enter their credit card details to get a free trial.

Don't try to fix a design problem with copy   As a guide, sentences of 8 words or fewer are classed as 'easy to read'. Copy problems can point to design issues. Good copy makes design work

> "High quality web content that's useful, usable, and enjoyable is one of the greatest competitive advantages you can create for yourself online." Kristina Halvorson, Content Strategy for the Web

3. We find it hard to get our team, including freelancers, to produce content in a consistent style

You want different team members as well as freelancers to produce consistent, well-structured, findable, sharable and search engine optimised content. You want everyone to pull together. You want to avoid a situation where you have to rewrite the blog post that your copywriter or marketing assistant just produced; or rebuild a product or landing page because it's too dissimilar to other pages that someone else worked on.

Solution (1): Draw up content templates   You can create content templates for all types of pages: product pages, staff biographies, section landing pages, blog pages and so on. They are a simple way of making sure you get the information that you need from members of your team or freelancers. You can be explicit about what you want and what you don't. If you are running a blog, for example, 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. You don't just want one headline and a few paragraphs of copy. A useful blog template might include these categories:

- 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

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

- a style guide
- an outline of your message architecture
- user personas

Also make sure you have a conversation about workflow. There are light weight solutions that control versions, and don't cost much money, such as GoogleDocs or Draft. Or consider using a content development platform like Gather Content. Alternatively, use a Markdown-supporting text editor and get your content producers to commit to a private repo in Github. Although you'll be lucky to find a copywriter than knows Markdown/HTML/Github. I only started learning to code last year.

Solution (2): Compile a style guide   It looks 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. . . unfocused? Or perhaps that you can't be bothered to pay attention to detail? Even if they don't consciously notice the change in tone, 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 and content.

The solution to this problem is a style guide – a set of guidelines and standards mainly covering style and tone. If there is a particular style guide that you like, you can always refer to it for general queries. Then you can just write a

supplementary style guide that targets issues of particular relevance to your company.

Good style guides tend to have lots of examples (see A List Apart's style guide). They may cover numbers, punctuation, preffered spellings, case and capitalisation, acronymns, sentence length, tense and call to actions. They can also be visually interesting: MailChimp's style guide makes really good use of visuals and examples.

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. 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.

4. We want to improve user engagement with our website but don't know where to start

You should always be analysing and testing your website to work out how you can improve the user experience and more effectively target your customer segments. However, to do this strategically, you need to know exactly what content is on your website and whether it is any good.

Solution: Create a content inventory or audit A content inventory is an organised list of your web content including as much information about each piece of content as possible. A content audit is a qualitative tool that can identify content that might be missing, as well as content that needs updating or removing.

A content inventory lets you know what content you have on your website. Even if you have a small site, you may forget what's on some of your pages 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 lets you see what content is performing well and what isn't. It includes extra things like:

- last update
- traffic/usage statistics

- accuracy
- usabilty
- actionability

. . . and so on. For categories like 'accuracy', 'usability' and 'actionability' you could use a ratings scale of 1-5, with 1 being rubbish and 5 being totally awesome. A 5* for accuracy would be awarded to a page that had factually correct and up-to-date content; a 5* for usability would be awarded to a page that gave users the information they needed, when they needed it, using appropriate language; a 5* for actionability would be awarded to a page that made it clear what action the user should take, whether that is buying a product, sharing content on social media, moving to another web page, and so on.

Once you've done an audit/inventory you can make some quickish wins by:

- improving underperforming content that has a lousy click through 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 make some longer terms wins by doing a gap analysis. This 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 for existing customers, 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 differentiate yourself. For example, if your competitor's website looks like every other Silicon Valley startup, then you can market your business as a bit more edgy/amusing/authentic and so on. Equally, if your competitor's pricing plan is 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, blog posts and social media.

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

> "Where in the recent past impact and differentiation could be achieved through pure design thinking, these days it is the way an organization creates and manages its content that is the real unique proposition in the marketplace." Mark Shaw, Copywriting

5. We want to differentiate ourselves from our competitors to promote brand loyalty and increase sales

You can't be everything to all people – and you shouldn't be. You have a nice logo and company colours but that isn't enough to create a brand. What you want is to develop a cohesive, consistent and enjoyable user experience across all your content.

Solution: Develop a message architecture According to content strategist 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 how do you want to be perceived? 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. It's no use telling your customers that you are 'reliable and care about quality' 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 document, while the former are about how you communicate with your target audience.

6. Our content marketing feels uneven and we're not sure it's offering a good return on investment

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

Solution: 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.

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 show what content is evergreen, so can be repackaged at a later date, and what is time sensitive, so will need archiving or editing.

You can create an editorial calendar as a table using Markdown and commit to Github. Or there are lots of spreadsheet templates online. If you hate tables and 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
- success of piece of content (to be filled in retrospectively)

This last category can help you keep track of the return on investment offered by your content marketing. But how do you measure this? It depends what you want your content to achieve. If your business model is based on reach then you'll probably be interested in social shares and similar. If your business model is based on sticky revenue, you'll want to track how your existing customers are engaging with your content. As Eric Ries says though, avoid vanity metrics. In the context of content marketing, this might include an over-emphasis on unique page views, without considering who these users are and how they have interacted with your content.

7. We're not sure if customers understand how to use our product, or that we're reaching everyone who might be a prospective customer

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 need. Don't just 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.

Solution: Research user personas To quote author 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 persona 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, inbox, social media, analytics and site search logs are a good place to start. Also, consider conducting a survey or user interviews to gain a deeper understanding about how your customers think.

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

8. Our landing pages look good but don't convert very well

Given that content is what your site visitors are most interested in, you'll see better results if you think about your content first before involving a designer. If you've already built your landing page it's not too late to improve your content though.

Solution (1): Mock-up wireframes Content strategist Richard Ingram describes wireframes as:

> 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.

Wireframes mean that you can get early stage feedback and make sure that your team are on the same page in terms of what you want to achieve. It's also easier to test a wireframe rather than a web page with clients and users because they are much easier to update.

However, a word of caution: your content will be displayed on different viewports so a fixed-size wireframe will only help you so much. Sometimes I'll wireframe for different viewports. It depends on how your design and development team work.

Solution (2): A/B test   If you've already built your landing page but it isn't converting well, you could a/b test to see what's causing the friction. Perhaps you have too many links? Too much copy? An underperforming headline? An unpersuasive call to action? Services like Optimizely and Visual Website Optimiser can make a/b testing fairly straightforward.

9. How do we get good content when we don't have a copywriter on the team?

You know you need good content in the same way you need good design, good accountancy advice and good development, but how do you get it?

Solution (1): We'll 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.

Solution (2): We'll get our 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 users to produce quality content you could offer them a discount on your product, or 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.

Solution (3): We'll write the content   If you're a good writer then go for it. My only word of warning is that 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 understand your copy or find it a bit 'meh'.

Solution (4): We'll 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 and perhaps annoying them. It's also 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 marketing 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 useful books at the end.

Solution (5): Okay, we'll 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, particuary at the beginning of the relationship, 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 your company is doing 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?

10. How do we tell if a freelancer is any good?

If you like a copywriter's portfolio then that's a good start. You might also look for:

- 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, users 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 or you're just not that into words, you could do some swotting up before hiring someone. Ginny Redish's book *Letting Go of the Words* is the best book on the subject. *Don't Make Me Think* by Steve Krug is also a great read in terms of all things web.

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 to give you their opinion. After all, your copywriter will be writing for your customers, not for you.

In terms of where you look for a good freelancer, you could try online marketplaces like Elance. Inviting people to bid on a job rather than making it open to everyone might weed out the timewasters. There are also 'talent agencies' like Scripted. Many copywriters have websites, although you might need to click through quite a few pages of Google to get to the independents. Or you can ask your network for recommendations on social media. Another option is to browse groups on LinkedIn and GooglePlus where freelancers hang out to see if you like the look of anyone. For example, there is a good GooglePlus blogging community where you might track down some decent freelancers.

What *is* content strategy?

It's just marketing right? Or souped up copywriting? Not exactly.

> Content strategy is the practice of planning for the creation, delivery, and governance of useful, usable content. - Kristina Halvorson.

CS helps you set up a repeatable process, so you know what to do when different content needs arise. Content strategists also create content – like me – but this isn't obligatory or even all that usual. Content marketing is slightly different. It 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. Colleen Jones makes the difference clear:

> I see the main distinction between the two fields of practice as purpose. Content strategy is essential for a wide range of purposes — media products, technical support, customer service, sales, and marketing, to name a few. Content marketing focuses on strategy and implementation for — you guessed it — marketing.

I'm not saying that one is 'better' than the other or that there isn't any overlap. There is – as there is with information architecture and user experience. However,

my particular interest is content strategy because it's relevant to so many aspects of your business, not just marketing.

If you want to learn more about content strategy and content marketing there is an excellent article comparing the two on the Content Strategy Forum.

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 existing user 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 templates (for example, a blog template)
- Begin to build a style guide

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 key performance indicators)
- Discuss your content audit/inventory and see if you can make any quick wins next week
- Go to the pub

Need help with your content strategy? Get in touch at hannah.adcock@gmail.com so we can talk about what you need. We'll come up with a package that suits your company and budget.

Further reading

I've included a list of books that are good, findable resources. However, you can always follow these authors on social media to discover useful links to online resources.

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
- *Rocket Surgery Made Easy: The do-it-yourself guide to finding and fixing usability problems* by Steve Krug

by Hannah Adcock of Contented Strategy
Converted from Markdown using Pandoc