Book Web Content Rx

A Quick and Handy Guide for Writers, Webmasters, eBayers, and Business People

Wayne English
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Recommendation

A company's website must generate revenue. If yours doesn't, this basic book may help correct any problems. Wayne English, founder of a web content consultancy, presents the fundamentals of web writing, design, search engine optimization, podcasts and hypertext markup language (html), so you can make your site more usable, popular and – most importantly – profitable. While much of his information isn't new, it is highly practical. English includes good sections on podcasts and digital photography, as well as handy pointers for creating email marketing campaigns. Surprisingly, though writing is an emphasis of this guide, it has an occasional typo and other minor grammatical hiccups. Those issues aside, *BooksInShort* recommends it to novice web writers and fledgling webmasters, and to company leaders who want to maximize their firms' web presence. Some of its tips could easily reimburse you for the cost of the book.

Take-Aways

- The most crucial aspect of your website, blog and other online materials is the message they convey. Ensure that your content is clear and effective.
- Don't depend on Flash animation or other formats search engines cannot "read" to communicate your message.
- Hold your website responsible for business results and track its progress using "web statistics."
- When writing for the web, be concise and put the most essential information first.
- Expect people to scan online text instead of fully reading it.
- For creative material that you can change or edit for free, try "open content" sources.
- Email marketing is an inexpensive, effective way to reach your target audience.
- To optimize your web content for search engines, employ keywords strategically. Do not "exceed…5% of all the words on any page for a single keyword."
- Phrase web page titles, H1 headings and H2 headings very carefully. Search engines emphasize these textual components.
- Use audio and video podcasts to inform, entertain or market to your audience.

Summary

A Spotlight on Content

When Thomas Edison patented the phonograph in 1877, he contributed to a revolution that has made content the driving force behind many new technologies. From CDs and VCRs to radio and television, people are drawn to tools that enable them to "hear, see or interact with" content. The internet is one of the more recent, and more advanced, developments in that ongoing movement.

> "From now on, content will remain important to the web as long as the web is important to people."

The web, an electronic medium for sharing and retrieving information, is essentially a "messenger." The content your company posts on its website is the "message." Always ensure that your site is communicating what you really want to say. Be aware that adding new content to your website does not automatically guarantee that search engines – and the people who use them – will find it. Avoid relying solely on Flash animation, JavaScript links or web pages consisting of large graphics to deliver your content, since search engines cannot "read" these formats. When a website isn't searchable, it often fails to meet its main purpose, which – for commercial sites – is earning money.

"[Your] site must do its job – else you're throwing your money away."

Good websites are credible and searchable, with clearly marked sections for customer support and payment instructions. To make your website more effective, follow these 12 pointers:

1. **Hold your website accountable** – It should have goals and responsibilities, just like any employee. To track its progress, determine your "web statistics": How many hits does it receive each day? Which pages draw the most viewers? Survey your clients to learn how they first came across your site, then look for it using the most popular search engines. Is it easy to find?
2. **Ask clients what they want from the site, then deliver it** – The more value your website offers customers, the more your company benefits. Providing good, reliable information is a great way to win a loyal following.
3. **Emphasize what you can do for your customers** – People want to know, "What's in it for me?" Be prepared to answer that question. Tell them how you can make their lives better or easier.
4. **Post an "About Us page and customer testimonials"** – On the About Us page, include your company's capabilities, history and achievements. Create a separate page for the testimonials, and link to it. Good testimonials are detailed and specific. Identify each speaker's position and company, if possible.
5. **Use email marketing** – Often, emailing is more effective than leaving a phone message. Ask customers for their email addresses during your business transactions. And if your site has many products, establish a different email address for each product.
6. **Create a newsletter** – Use it to introduce new products or to explain applications of existing ones. Include links to relevant industry news. However, keep it brief; don't exceed two pages of content.
7. **Know your audience** – When preparing material for your site, tailor it to your target customers. Be as simple or as sophisticated as necessary, and gauge the right amount of information to present.
8. **Register your web address with numerous search engines** – Contact Google, Yahoo, AltaVista and others. For a list of search engines in more than 350 countries and territories, go to searchenginecolossus.com.
9. **Keep navigation simple** – Your goal: a user-friendly website where visitors can quickly find the most important pages. Create a smooth, consistent experience for them by placing navigation links in the same spot on each page. Don't forget to verify that all your links work properly.
10. **Include a search box on your home page** – This helps people find information on your site. Use Google or another external search engine, or install your own search feature with a software program such as Fluid Dynamics Search Engine.
11. **Know your medium** – Web copy is different from printed copy. People scan online content instead of fully reading it. Thus, your web copy should be "tight," with powerful, simple words that do not dilute your message. If you incorporate print material, adapt it for the web by trimming the text and shortening the paragraphs.
12. **Send out press releases** – Keep the media up-to-date about your company and your website by distributing a press release about every three months, or at least a couple of times each year. Releases are more powerful when you link them to a local, state or national event. Don't "expect a thinly disguised advertisement to be picked up as news."

"Kill the Fluff," and Other Writing Do's and Don'ts

Before you start writing your web content, develop a site map. That will help you determine an overall structure for your material. Consult the webmaster to ensure that your plan will work with the existing website design – and confirm that the design is already finalized and approved. Ask the webmaster to inform you about any design changes, since they could affect the content.

"The goal of your content is identical to the goal of your website."

When writing for the web, be concise. Make every word count by eliminating the fluff. Tailor your message to your target customer. Follow the inverted pyramid structure common in journalism by starting with the "meat and potatoes," or most essential information.

Personalize your message with words like "you," "your" and "we." Use positive terms, such as "free," "guaranteed," "sale," "introducing," "results" and "proven," to get higher response rates. Avoid negative terms like "buy," "sell," "failure" and "difficult." Write in the present tense and active voice, and try to summarize the main idea of a paragraph in its first sentence.

"The necessity of communicating to your user, your intended audience or your reader is paramount for any writer, web writers included."

Focus on building credibility – for example, by offering a guarantee. Contrary to conventional wisdom, "the stronger and longer your guarantee, the fewer returns you'll receive." The reason: People believe that guaranteed products have very high quality. Customers also trust companies that list their street addresses, rather than post office boxes, on their websites. Graphics, especially product photos, can help you seem more trustworthy.

Borrowers Beware

Web content comes from a variety of sources. You may write it yourself or get it from other parties. Using other people's material exposes you to copyrights, however. Be aware that not all protected material contains a copyright notice. When someone creates a work, a copyright is granted automatically, regardless of whether the work displays the copyright symbol. Always obtain permission from copyright owners before posting their work.

"A small amount of high-quality content is far superior to a lot of fluff."

By contrast, "open content" has lighter copyright restrictions – or none at all. You can even modify or edit this free material. Certain U.S. government websites can also be good sources of free content; for instance, try the United States Government Printing Office site, gpoaccess.gov. Or browse syndication sites, like EzineArticles.com and FreeSticky.com. Really Simple Syndication (RSS) tools can connect you to "thousands of content sources."

You've Got Mail

Email, the "true killer app of the web," provides a far-reaching, inexpensive platform for marketing. Indeed, email marketing is growing increasingly popular. One survey of 1,500 marketers found that 72% intended to expand their email marketing budgets in 2007.

> "To have people become part of your [blog] conversation, it helps if you become part of theirs."

Follow a few simple guidelines when preparing email marketing content: First, include newsletters, e-zines and other materials that "complement your current services." This will increase your value to customers. Ensure that your header, links and other crucial information aren't graphics, since they take too long to download. To prevent others from seeing your entire list of recipients, use the blind carbon copy (Bcc) feature. Finally, build greater trust with your clients by stating your privacy policy and adhering to it.

Entering the Blogosphere

Creating a blog is an excellent, simple way to increase your company's online visibility. Blogs enable you to express opinions, share news or advertise your business. Keep your blog posts succinct – around 250-300 words is best. Enliven posts with catchy headlines and subheads, and use numbered and bulleted lists to improve readability. Whenever possible, ask your readers for their comments and reactions. To publicize your blog effectively, send out press releases, inform your customers, promote it on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, and use traditional advertising techniques.

Revving the Search Engines

Optimizing your web content for search engines will help draw visitors to your site. Pay special attention to the hypertext markup language (html) tags you use in web content, since search engines "assign importance to the text they contain." From a search engine's perspective, the most crucial tag on a web page is probably the title tag, particularly the first word in that tag. Carefully choose this word and ensure that it reflects the entire page's contents. Avoid starting your title with "Welcome to..." Search engines may not find your site. If you search this phrase on Google, for example, you will receive more than 780 million "returns." And don't list the name of your company in the title, unless you are a widely known business that users are likely to search for by name. Test your title text by entering it into various search engines. If that leads you to sites that are relevant to your company, you are using the right words. If the title is too long or too focused, it will not produce adequate results, so keep it between 40 and 60 characters.

> "Some people do believe that podcasting will be bigger than blogging."

Now take a look at your H1 and H2 headings, which search engines emphasize in that order. These are your most important headings, although heading tags range from H1 to H6. Optimize their keyword density while maintaining smoothness and readability. To calculate the density, divide the number of uses of a certain keyword into the entire body text word count. Employ keywords strategically; do not "exceed...5% of all the words on any page for a single keyword." If you do, search engines may purposely avoid listing your site.

> "Hearing music on a podcast can go a long way to set a mood and provide a pleasing background ambience."

Finding good keywords often involves trial and error. In a search engine, enter words people are likely to use when looking for your site. The search engine will tell you how many times people have searched for those words. Or use a website like Spyfu.com to see what keywords appear in your competitors' content. Avoid the keywords they do use, and exploit those that they don't – as long as those terms are relevant to your business.

Being Heard and Seen

Podcasting is a powerful website tool that is relatively easy to create. Podcasts, which can transmit either audio or video content, are ideal for presenting instructions, news, entertainment, training or marketing. To make your own podcasts, you will need a microphone and some recording software – for example, Audacity, which allows you to "record live audio via microphone(s) or mixer channels," or the LAME library, where you can "export your recorded audio file to MP3." For a video podcast, you will need a video camera, a cable and editing software. A typical podcast should include an "introduction," opening and closing music, and a consistent "greeting."

> "Making high-quality pictures is no different from making any other high-quality product. As with all else in life, practice makes perfect."

Photos can add to your website, but only if they serve a specific, clear purpose. Never use a photo unless it has a caption and is "sharply focused," expertly exposed and well-framed. When snapping a digital photo, avoid using the digital zoom, if possible, since it produces a lower-quality photo. Instead, stand as near as possible to the subject. When you're done, copy your digital photos into TIFF or other "native format" files to edit them without losing any details. Then save them as JPEGs. Now you're ready to post your eye-catching, high-quality and relevant pictures online.

About the Author

Wayne English is the founder of WebContentRx.com. He has published numerous articles in major publications, including a monthly column for a photography magazine.