

Audience, Relevance, and Search

Targeting Web Audiences
with Relevant Content

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Targeting Web Audiences with Relevant Content

James Mathewson, Frank Donatone and Cynthia Fishel
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Recommendation

Even if you're the next William Shakespeare, if you don't write according to online standards you will fail as a web content creator. Internet users will not just ignore your web content; they probably won't know it exists. This savvy new Internet writing guidebook by IBM web pros James Mathewson, Frank Donatone and Cynthia Fishel covers all of the technical information you need to develop web content that Internet users will find relevant and engaging. The authors emphasize that quality web content – material people can find and will read – depends on the right keywords. *BooksInShort* recommends this superb, readable, wholly practical guide to editors, writers and those who plan and create material for the Internet.

Take-Aways

- Different media require different writing.
- Writing offline and writing online are as unlike as writing in different languages.
- Online users will abandon your web content if they find it irrelevant.
- Seed your web writing with keywords to ensure reader relevance.
- Web content design should be search-friendly.
- Tailor your web text to fit Google's search engine and people will find you.
- Online users, in effect, "own" web content. The person who wrote it does not.
- Web writers should structure their websites around the keywords that searchers will use to look for them.
- Google's PageRank, which increases your page's hit frequency status according to its number of external links, is as crucial in web content planning as keyword research.
- To maximize its inbound links, your website must become a "hub of authority."

Summary

Web Writing Is Not Traditional Writing

The web can be a difficult environment and many professional writers do not understand how to write for it. Three primary rules of writing for the Internet align with the habits of web readers: 1) Be brief; web readers have short attention spans; 2) Readers find content through search engines, so choose words search engines can find; and 3) Readers enjoy passing content on to others, so provide links. Some other important considerations:

- **The web is a vast universe of unstructured content** – On the web, relevance is paramount. With infinite choices, readers will focus only on what matters to them. Design your web content for search engines. In functional terms that means: Write for Google. When you do, your material will be relevant to your website visitors. Plus, they will be able to understand it and "act on it."
- **Web users evaluate your words to check for relevance** – Flowery, figurative or highly technical words and terms will send readers elsewhere. In traditional media, writers are in charge of the terms they use. Web readers establish what "they think" a particular word or phrase means. Internet readers thus "own" web content and Internet writers do not.
- **The web is filled with incorrect information** – Web readers are skeptical of online content. You must convince quickly them that your content is credible, so

include links to respected authorities.

- **Regularly change and improve your web content** – Internet readers expect updated information. Upgrade regularly. Searchers perpetually seek new content, so refresh yours as often as possible.

“Writing for the Web is fundamentally different from writing for print.”

You cannot govern the online reading experience. As a newspaper, magazine or book writer, you can assume that your readers regard your material as relevant. Otherwise, they wouldn't read it. Web readers may land on your web page randomly, bounced in from search engines or social media referrals. Readers spend less time reading web pages than print pages. After scanning, online readers give you “an average of three to six seconds to engage them.” If the content doesn't intrigue them, they hit the back button to chase more relevant material. Offline, you can make an informed guess about the identity of your readers. Online, you haven't a clue. Your online writing is aimed not at individual readers, but at search engines. That's how readers find you. Focus on the requirements of interested searchers who seek specific keywords and links.

Keywords

For a web writer, keywords – “strings of characters that people enter into search fields” – are mother's milk. Keywords may be single words, long phrases or “word combinations.” So-called “long-tail” keywords are highly specific, lengthy phrases. They are designed to draw Internet users with particular interests. To learn about the context of long-tail keywords, visit social media sites, blogs and online forums that are popular with your target audience and your competitors. Identify repeated keywords and phrases. Research keywords using Google Alerts, Yahoo Pipes and Yahoo Alerts. Popular words – or “tags” – that people assign to relevant web content and social media are also helpful.

“Writing for the Web isn't about what's clever or interesting to the writer; it's about what's relevant to the reader.”

Pepper your main web page and subsequent pages with keywords that matter. Post the specific purpose of your pages – shopping, support, services and so on – in your website titles and links. Add “a verb to your keyword phrase,” for example, “learn about” or “shop for” or “compare.”

Keyword research is a straightforward process. Brainstorm the “seed words” people might use to find information about your topic. Start with the most generic terms. Create “keyword clouds,” keywords that relate to one another. Google AdWords is a good tool for keyword research. Other tools include Keyword Discovery Tool, Goggle Insights and the Free Keyword List Generator. Wordtracker helps you check your competition. Type your potential keywords into Google's search box. It will show you “various incremental possible matches for your search string,” each matched by the “hits” or returns for each search phrase.

“Learning to write for the Google algorithm is an essential aspect of writing for web readers.”

Make processing easy for the Goggle “crawler” that identifies the keywords on your web pages. Don't load your pages with a lot of Flash or JavaScript. Instead, use “HTML or XML pages.” Make sure your body text includes the keywords from your titles and headings. Pay attention to metadata, that is, “extra-linguistic information hidden from view in the code of pages.” Some other tips:

- **“Spelling out acronyms”** – In print, writers usually spell out a complete name once, for example “Product Lifestyle Management,” and then subsequently employ its initials or acronym (PLM). Don't do that online. Crawlers look for full terms, so spell out all of them.
- **“Pumping up keyword density”** – Make sure 2% to 4% of your body text is keywords, but don't use more than 4% or you will bore the reader.
- **“Ensuring keyword proximity”** – Crawlers respond when keywords are close together. So “managing your product life cycles” is better than “it is important to manage the lifecycle of the products in your portfolio.”
- **“Stemming”** – This concerns the “alternative grammatical forms of words.” Example: “stem” forms are “stem, stemmed, stemming, stems” and so on. Using as many stem forms as possible improves search results.
- **“Using synonyms and other related words”** – Internet readers will use various synonyms for their search terms. The more synonyms you use, the more searchers will land on your website.
- **“Using descriptive link text”** – Make your links as colorful and evocative as your text.
- **“Bolding for emphasis”** – Boldface your keywords to reduce bounce.

The “Google-First Methodology”

Many web writers incorrectly try to optimize their web content “after the fact.” That is, they plan and develop their content, then conduct keyword research for search engine optimization (SEO). Then they sprinkle or “seed” their keywords through their pages. For obvious reasons, this works poorly. Content developed without an awareness of the needed keywords may not be relevant to keywords you plug in as an afterthought. Readers who then land on your web pages after typing in keywords will find your content irrelevant and will leave. Google frowns on such keyword seeding. Violate this standard too often and Google “will expunge your page from its index.”

“We are moving from a static print culture to a dynamic web culture.”

Don't do things backward. First, use keyword research to “learn how [your] target audience uses language.” Then write your web content. This way, you ensure that Internet users will find your content relevant, since you are addressing them in their “own words.” Your content will match their needs. And Google will not ignominiously banish your pages.

Creating Great Web Content

Follow this six-step plan to create the most effective web content:

1. Establish exactly who your target audience is.

2. Do keyword research to determine what specific words and phrases your target audience uses to search for relevant web content. Make Google your default search engine for this research.
3. Create a list of “core words” that are most popular with your target audience.
4. Create a web page “for each of [these] words.”
5. Routinely test the pages you create for relevance.
6. Adjust your web content to optimize its relevance.

“The web is like a library where everything is organized by publisher, and there are millions of publishers.”

Notice how this approach also differs sharply from planning and creating text for print media. There, you passively wait while readers buy your books, or the publications that carry your articles. In web writing, you actively recruit readers by using keywords they search for online.

Make your web content contextually relevant to those keywords so it engages readers once they find your website. You actually do not define your target audience. Instead, you discover its common characteristics. They, it’s up to you to define those traits minutely, that is, focus tightly on readers’ specific interests. Optimizing your website for keywords rests upon having a smart “content plan” that you develop in light of your keyword research. Plan your content the same way a supermarket plans its inventory. Your “content modules” are similar to the products in the supermarket. Your individual web pages are comparable to the aisles of merchandise.

PageRank

Keywords are only part of the puzzle. “PageRank,” Google’s proprietary name for how it prioritizes pages, is every bit as important. The more external links feed into your web pages, the higher Google ranks them. You must promote your web pages to “high-value sites” to get them to create “inbound” links to you. The more links the better, and the more “link equity” or “link juice” your website accrues.

“If you find high bounce rates you will need to revisit your content, choose new keywords and republish – and do more keyword research.”

Google and other search engines see incoming links as “votes” from other websites about your website’s overall quality. You gain credibility with such votes.

To get other websites to link to yours, make your website a “hub of authority.” That requires top quality web content known as “link bait.” Don’t try to trick Google, for instance, by trying to create incoming links by getting other websites to link to yours by promising to link to theirs. Google’s sophisticated search algorithm quickly sniffs out such reciprocal arrangements.

“Search-first writing is based on the premise that search engines provide a lot of insights into what is relevant to your target audience.”

The best way to create link equity is to become a respected authority within “the community of site owners” dealing with your topic. Enhance your existing relationships with other authorities in your field.

You can create new relationships by exploiting Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and other social media websites. Remember that you cannot secure links directly from social media websites due to their “nofollow” standard. Google developed an HTML “attribute value” that it attaches to certain social media links, so that any link from them cannot generate link juice. All Wikipedia pages, for examples, are nofollow.

“For every sentence in the English language, there are something like 30 alternative ways of expressing the same thing with different related words.”

Create a blog to showcase your authority and expertise. Tweet about your topic on a regular basis. As the web becomes more of a rich content medium, make sure your website content includes a variety of media, including “PDFs, videos and podcasts.” Use “YouTube [and] iTunes to post content. Touch all of the social media bases.

Web Analytics

Web analytics are statistical analyses that help determine how well your website does in terms of “users’ engagement.” Numerous online tools can help you carry out this calculation.

“It takes a big commitment to thrive in social media.”

Some primary metrics to analyze include:

- “**Traffic**” – Page views (how many times people viewed your page), visits (how many people visited your website) and “unique visits” (individual visitors).
- “**Bounce rate**” – A calculation of the ratio of visitors who leave your website a few seconds after arrival.
- “**Referral data**” – Tracks external referrals from search engines.
- “**Keyword data**” – Shows the keywords that people use to find your website.
- “**Page audits**” – To improve performance, develop a quality “content summary as the first two lines of your body copy.” Include keywords in this summary.
- “**Engagement rate**” – Goes up when people click on your internal links.
- “**Time on the page**” – The seconds or minutes someone spends visiting your page.
- “**Site overlays**” – Which internal links work well on your site and which ones don’t.
- “**Pathing data**” – Shows the links a visitor clicks on while visiting your website.

About the Authors

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