WHITE PAPER

How to Develop a User-Centered Content Strategy

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Your web site content may have been orderly and manageable when you started it, but as you've grown, it's grown. Now, you've discovered there's a problem with content.

- Content is messy.
- Content is scattered.
- Content is unfocused.
- Content isn't working.

You need to find a way to make your content work, and make it work for you, or the best you can hope for is that it won't be *too* bad.

In this white paper, we're going to talk about a process to help you have compelling, timely, on-message content that works for you and for your users. See, compelling content doesn't just happen; you need a content strategy.

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

No matter where the content is— online, in print, burned to disk, etc.[1] — a content strategy will help you have better content, with consistent messaging, that helps you and your users move forward.

To create a user-centered, organization-supporting content strategy, you're going to need quality information about your users' goals, your organization's goals, and your content. The better your information, the better your end results.

So, let's talk about the ingredients for a user-centered, business-supporting content strategy.

User-centered

First off, the users. If you want to be user-centered, you have to know about your users.

- Who are your users?
- What do they need?
- What do they want?

This may sound easy, but sometimes, the people you think are visiting your website are not actually the people visiting your website. Learning who you users are or will be helps you to make informed decisions that will best meet their needs.

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1. *For the purposes of this white paper, we'll focus on web content, not other content assets.*

To validate your understanding of who your website users are:

- Review member databases and registration info
- Look at Google analytics data
- Review market research
- Look at any other data that can help you answer the question of WHO.

Then, to deepen your understanding of users:

- Conduct user interviews
- Distribute online surveys
- Develop user, task, and environment profiles
- Create user persona portraits
- Conduct card sorting exercises

Future Users:

What sort of users might you want to attract in the future? Think about them when planning your content strategy.

If you've done your user research[2], you have a good idea of what is important to your users, and what they want the most. Defining and prioritizing user groups and their objectives is the first step in the process for creating a user-centered, organization-supporting content strategy.

Business-supporting

The second step, naturally, is focusing on supporting the organization.

We'll assume you already know who your organization is, that you have a good understanding of its history, its resources, its pain points. Often, though, organizations don't have a solid understanding of what they want their website to do for them, and for their users. The goals and objectives haven't been defined.

If you don't have clearly defined goals and objectives, you don't know where you're going.

When you develop your goals and objectives, you're laying out a course of action, like plotting a course on a map. Where do you want to go? Where do you need to stop en route? What can you put off until your next trip?

You need to determine your goals and objectives, and you need to think about not only your overall organizational goals, and your broad communication goals, but your specific website goals. What do you want your website to do for you?

After you've defined your goals and objectives, you need to *prioritize* them. If there's a conflict for resources, which goals and objectives will be supported *first*? What's the most important?

2. *For more information on user research, see our white paper "The Components of User-centered Analysis and Design," by Susan Ward.*

With your users' goals defined and prioritized, and your organization's goals defined and prioritized, you can find the sweet spot, where those goals overlap.

- The sweet spot is where you should focus your initial content strategy efforts.
- The sweet spot is where you'll get the most bang for your buck.
- The sweet spot is where you want to be.

How do you get there? Your content takes you there.

Figure 1. The sweet spot is where you should focus your initial content strategy efforts

Content Inventory and Audit

You need inventory and audit your content. You need to catalog and evaluate it. That is, you need to know what you have, and how well it suits your needs. The nicest car in the world, with the best gas mileage, the comfiest seats, and the best-designed dashboard layout still won't get you from Portland to Taipei.

The tool has to fit the need.

So, let's look at your tools—your content. To do so, you'll want to create a content inventory. You be cataloging your content assets, taking note of what you have, where it is, and what you know about it.

It's important to note: A content inventory is not a content strategy…yet. A content inventory is a snapshot of what you have.

When you build your inventory, you want to capture as much information about the content as possible.

For example, you'll want to capture:

- A unique identifier
- URL
- Link title
- Type of document
- Any meta data keywords
- The meta data description
- Name of content owner
- Date created
- Date last updated

Some of your content won't have complete information. It might lack keywords, it might not have a clear content owner, or it might have the same link title as a hundred other pieces of content. Don't worry about that during your inventorying. Don't worry about judging anything at this point. You're just taking down the information and getting in order so that when you're ready, you're prepared to evaluate.

When you evaluate, you're going to want to ask questions about each piece of content. You'll want to find out:

- What audiences does it serve?
- What goals and objectives does it support?
- Is it Redundant, Outdated, or Trivial?
- How many page visits has it had over time?
- And, note any impressions you have about the content -- numbers are all well and good, but the human factor can't be left out.

Go back to the user goals and organization goals you defined earlier. Map each piece of content to each goal it supports. Put that information in your audit. This inventory and audit are vital steps in the process, but you don't have a strategy until it is actionable.

Creating Needed Content

How do we get there? Through gap analysis. Gap analysis is where you determine what you don't have, but still need.

Since you've put the time and energy into mapping all your content to your user and organization objectives, you're in a position to discover what you're lacking. Sort by your goals and objectives columns. See what goals have the most content supporting them, and which have little if any content. Sort by your audience groups, and ask the same questions.

You should start noticing some problem areas—unsupported and underserved goals. You know what content you have that supports those goals and objectives. You know how much content you have supporting the objectives. You know what objectives aren't supported.

And you know what you need to do: Fix it.

First off, look for wherever there's a content gap for something in your sweet spot of overlapping objectives, *fix* that. Other objectives come later, even if these other objectives seem very important to one of your internal stakeholders. If time and resources are limited, focus on the things that will bring you the biggest return. Support multiple objectives with each effort.

Prioritizing gap fixes will help you determine what content you need so that you create only needed content.

So, when do you *need* to create content? When a key objective isn't supported by content, we need to create content.

To do that, we:

- Choose messages—at least one message per prioritized goal or objective
- Prioritize those messages—both for each goal/objective, and overall
- Select your distribution channels—web site, email, print, social sites, etc.

It’s important to think about the distribution channels, as different channels support different objectives. For example, Facebook is a fabulous channel, but probably not the best channel for communicating the nitty gritty details of your annual report.

After you’ve sifted through your content audit, you’ll discover you have some content – perhaps quite a bit of content – that doesn’t support any user or organization goals and objectives.

Archive anything that doesn’t support your goals. Archive ruthlessly. Your website is not a dumping ground for every piece of information you’ve ever created. Your website is a strategic communication tool.

Disseminate only *needed* content.

> **Tip:**
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> *Audit your content and review your content strategy at least twice a year; you can do it when you change your clocks to Daylight Savings Time.*

Content Governance

Once you’ve invested the time and effort into establishing a user-centered, business-supporting collection of content, how do you keep it going? Content governance too often gets left out of the picture because organizations aren’t sure just who, exactly, should be doing it.

It can be a simple model where one person is in charge, or there can be a small committee. Consider including representatives from various departments:

- Editorial
- Membership
- Communications
- Marketing
- IT
- Other subject matter experts

It’s vital the person or persons have time to allocate to content governance, and authority to say “no.” If they don’t have the support to create and enforce policies and standards, they will not be able to govern your content. You can avoid some of that stress by making sure you have senior- and mid-level people identified as governance people.

They will need to ensure content is:

- Relevant – Which goals and objectives are met by the content?
- On-message – What messages does the content advance?
- Timely – by timely, I mean they’ll be asking questions like:
    - Does the content fit into the editorial calendar?
    - Is it still “fresh”? Scheduled reviews of content will help ensure that you don’t have old ad rates, old board members, or other stale and inaccurate content out on the live site.
    - Is the archiving policy being adhered to? If content isn’t timely, it needs to be fixed, or archived.

They will also need to revisit the content strategy periodically. What's working? What's not working? What goals have changed? What new needs have developed?

Content Management Systems

There are a host of content management systems (CMSes) out there that can help you keep track of your content, to help you make sure that it keeps serving your content strategy. If you're starting small, or if you're not sure of the value of a CMS yet, you can track this information in your content audit spreadsheet. Add in columns for review-by dates, archive dates, etc. To make this work, though, you'll need to note every piece of content as it is added to your website—every single one. If you have multiple people contributing content to the site, your low-tech content management won't work for long.

Figure 2. SharePoint, Drupal, and Ektron are leading content management systems

Conclusion

To get the most out of your web site investment, you need to create a plan for the creation, delivery, and governance of your content. You need that content to be:

- Useful
- Usable
- User-centered
- Business-supporting

To create your plan, follow this process:

- Determine and prioritize user goals and objectives
- Determine and prioritize organization goals and objectives
- Catalog and evaluate existing content
- Identify content gaps
- Archive ruthlessly
- Create and disseminate needed content
- Keep it going

About the Author:

Wendy A.F.G. Stengel is a Senior Information Architect at TerpSys. Wendy has over 10 years of experience in information architecture and content management. She has extensive knowledge of user-focused information architecture and content strategy, guiding the design and development of large management system solutions for government, association and non-profit clients. She has excellent problem solving, analytical, and conflict resolution skills. Wendy has developed online and content strategy for customers including Health Resources and Services Administration and the Department of Veteran Affairs.