What happens when we architect a user experience that makes the content easy to find? The content becomes a focus of the experience, a star of the show. If the content performs well, it will have an influence. Users will be more likely to take the action we want them to take, make the decision we want them to make or have the perception we want them to have. Users will be more likely to consider our brand, our product or our idea.

Yet we do not treat content like a star. We treat it like an extra, at best. What is more, after years in the trenches of designing interactive experiences, I have found that user experience (UX) professionals and interactive marketing professionals push for opposite content extremes. UX professionals try to ensure the content is usable. A few characteristics of usable content include being findable, scannable, readable, concise and layered. The problem is that content can be usable but not influential. Consider the Holiday Inn page (Figure 1). All of the right information about the property is available, but it is not compelling.

Interactive marketing professionals try to influence, sometimes with little regard to usability. In the Victoria’s Secret example (Figure 2), a layer promoting tank tops slides down the screen and disrupts the checkout experience. The user is trapped and cannot move forward in the process without closing the layer.

Clearly, we need balance.

In addition to solving this practical problem, now is the time to consider influence for several strategic reasons.

1. **Tough economic times call for being aggressive – in the right way.**
   Now is the time for our employers and our clients to speak effectively to users about differentiators, benefits and care for customer satisfaction. Now is the time to show customers appreciation for their business. Now is not the time to bombard users with obnoxious, disruptive ads.

2. **Content (not technology) is a social actor.**
   In the book *Persuasive Technology*, B.J. Fogg identifies social actor and creating a relationship as one way technology persuades. [1]
   I argue that usually the technology itself is not persuading. The content is. A computer, website or mobile phone delivers the information to a user at the right time. But the content ultimately has the influence.
Moreover, we live in an age of automation and self-service. Interactive experiences are taking the place of or augmenting in-person experiences. Interactive content is taking the role of customer service representative, sales representative, concierge, tech support and more. Content needs to speak and act in the way an organization’s best customer-facing representatives do. Sadly, content often speaks like an organization’s duds, not its stars.

3. Analysts are talking about it.
In the business world, analysts have recognized a problem – companies pay too much attention to managing content and too little attention to crafting it. The Forrester report *Use Persuasive Content to Improve the Customer Experience* puts it this way:

> We “…can drive significant improvements in customer experiences. How? By putting more emphasis on using content to help customers – whether it is providing relevant information when customers buy a product or delivering easy-to-use and understandable content for customer self-service websites – rather than simply focusing on how to create, manage and search for content.”

So how do we make content influential? First, a definition is in order. Merriam-Webster [3] defines influence as “the act or power of producing an effect without apparent exertion of force or direct exercise of command” (p. 59). Our content can subtly yet powerfully produce the effect we want so that we do not have to resort to force tactics, as Victoria’s Secret did. Based on my experience, I offer three key tips below. For more tips, please see the slides from the IA Summit 2009 presentation. [4]

1. **Talk like a person.**
   This tip sounds simple. Yet I am amazed how time and again content reads as if a content management system regurgitated. Take, for example, the main content from a product page of a major online retailer (Figure 3).

   ![An incoherent mash of information](image1)

   At a glance, the content appears usable. It even uses bulleted lists. However, if read, the content repeats itself and is an incoherent mash of features, benefits, specifications and product numbers.

   Content is a social actor, so it needs to sound human. It needs to reflect care, enthusiasm and emphasis. Above is a product page with content that does just that (Figure 4).

2. **Use the right tone.**
   Tone imbues content – and consequently the user experience – with a
flavor or feel. Tone is important to conveying a brand or organization personality. Bliss, for instance, demonstrates a distinct personality through the content’s sassy tone (Figure 5).

3. Appeal to the left and right brain.
   Ever since Aristotle, we’ve known the importance of appealing to logic (logos), emotion (pathos) and credibility (ethos). For example, the Gotvmail home page (Figure 6) appeals to logic through pricing, to emotion through a branding message and testimonial, and to credibility through partner logos, award logos and “featured in” logos. The result is a powerfully persuasive mix of content in a compact area.

Achieving these tips is impossible without giving content care. If we continue to treat content as an extra to information architecture, to content management or to anything else, we miss a bright opportunity to influence users. Content is not a nice-to-have extra. Content is a star of the user experience show. Let’s make content shine.

Resources Mentioned in the Article