What's the Buzz about Content Strategy?

by Rahel Anne Bailie

Content Strategy

A story that drives home the place of content strategy in the field of user experience is about my mother. When my mother was diagnosed with cancer, I, being the eldest child, went into research mode. I scoured the web for any information I could find about uterine cancer so that I could be informed and offer some support, if not help, around her treatment. I would do a Google search, then head for the information about symptoms, treatments and survival rates. There is a lot of information out there, and a lot of conflicting information, so I went to a lot of websites.

Sometimes, I found the information I was looking for, and other times I didn't. When I found what I was looking for, I was relieved. But when I couldn't find the information, I didn't stop to marvel about the taxonomy or navigation, or the color palette or experience, or the affordance on the buttons. What I noticed is that I had just wasted time looking on a site that was missing the information I had hoped to find. It's not that I didn't appreciate the navigation and colors and affordance and all the other good things that make up a smooth user experience. It's that the beauty of the hunt is negated if the treasure is lacking or missing.

This is an all-too-common occurrence, the good-scent, bad-content user experience. Many theories have arisen about why this has become a recurring theme in the web world. The most plausible one is a variation on Alan Cooper's *The Inmates Are Running the Asylum* [1]. The developers of software and, later, web applications drove the projects and had the power to determine the

user experience. The focus was on technological possibilities, and the interface was an engineer's view into their world. They wanted to code, not plan, and transmuted their mental model, whatever it might be, by developing code.

Cooper [2] championed the value of investing in the user experience, and we saw the shift to emphasizing user-centered design, whether that morphed into user experience [3], experience design [4], service design [5] or one of the other variations on the UX theme. The commonality is that before any code is written, we need to understand the consumers – from how they will typically use the product to the cognitive processes that help users process the information to the human factors involved in its use.

In the world of user-centered design [6], there was room for user analysis [7], information architecture [8], transaction design [9], visual design [10] and usability testing [11]. While this was an important step toward the maturity of the field, there was still a conspicuous gap in who got a place at the table. Content was considered outside of the scope of the user experience and often left to the client to figure out.

The problem with the model as it stands now is that content is still considered "the stuff that goes into the design." Content is populated into the design; it is migrated from its previous location to the new design. The problem with this development model lies in the placement of content as an adjunct to the primary process, instead of its placement at the center of the

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process. One system designer, Dorian Taylor, captured the essence of this conundrum when he asserted [12] that the web doesn't *have* content, it *is* content.

Giving content a peripheral role creates spin-off problems that are not easily rectified through a tweak to the design or even through a change order. Putting content at center stage means changing some of the fundamental ways we think about content in the content of development projects:

- **Form follows function.** The principle of form follows function states that the form of an object must be based on its intended purpose. If the purpose of the site is to inform, sell, share or entertain, then the consumption of content is the function. When the primary function for a site (or application or software) is to provide information to content consumers, then the design should be created to support the content. If the content is not created before the design begins, then form is not following function. Instead, the function is being crammed into the form.

- **Content is the treasure; UX is the treasure hunt.** The elements of design – from the architecture and navigation to the look and feel to the code functionality and everything in between – are all components that come together to help the content consumer reach the information needed in the most efficient way possible. But in the end, if there is no content, the experience has failed. The UX treasure hunt was a success, but the experience will be remembered by the lack of treasure at the end.

- **Clients are subject matter experts, not content experts.** Content development has become too complex to be left in the hands of the client. We don't expect clients to be experts at information architecture, though they know how to create folder structures on shared drives. Similarly, we shouldn't expect clients to be experts at content strategy [13], just because they know how to use a word processor. Writers cannot be expected to know enough about content standards and content modeling, re-use models [14], content for metatags [15], microformats [16], writing for syndication [17] and componentization for content management systems [18] to make informed decisions about how to pull all of the pieces together.

- **Content has become a major pain point.** When project managers say that the content aspect of a project is the major pain point, they recognize only that the launch is being held up by lack of content. The absence of content can often be attributed to a few key failures:
  - Content migration didn't go as planned, because the content on the old site was unsuitable, inconsistently structured or unmappable to the new site. The content could also be trapped in attachments, such as PDF files, which can't be migrated without several passes requiring manual intervention.
  - The content, whether written or migrated, is unusable in the new site or app. It may describe outdated functionality, not be chunked in ways that are suitable for integration with the new design.
  - The new software/app/site design doesn't accommodate the content. There is no way to provide the necessary information or instructions within the design that has just been, no doubt, approved in a lengthy and painful sign-off process.
  - There is simply no content for certain areas – often the new, key areas – because there was no understanding of how long it takes to create suitable content, or there is a lack of understanding about why accurate, readable content is important.
  - There is no budget. Content is a major budget item, so the redesign proposal omitted content, in order to lower the project cost. Now, the organization is told they are responsible for content development, and they realize they have a combination of no time, budget and/or expertise to start churning out content.

Enter Content Strategy

The creation and delivery of content is often examined during some period of change, perhaps during a website refresh project or a knowledge base upgrade. In those cases, developers own the code side of a project; the UX professionals own the design process; but when it comes to content, there is a vacuum. And as the saying goes, nature abhors a vacuum. As a result, content strategy has begun to fill the vacuum in what is generally an unclaimed and misunderstood space.

Content strategy is a repeatable system that governs the management of content throughout the entire lifecycle. This is a brief statement, and looking at it more closely gives us some insights into the nature of content strategy:

- **It's strategic.** It governs what happens to content during the implementation phases. This is the stage where the planning and analysis happen. It's not only where the "how" is addressed but also the "why." It's about processes within.

- **It's repeatable.** A content strategy is not a one-off activity. It's a way to handle content within a corporate context and moving up the publishing maturity model to a place where a commitment has been made to manage and sustain the content lifecycle. (See the information process maturity model [19] for an explanation of the levels.)

- **It's about process.** The processes within a content lifecycle are system-agnostic, though any organization with a large corpus likely uses some sort of system to assist with process management. The processes are established as part of the strategy phase and implemented during the content lifecycle.

- **It's governing.** Content strategy is being the guardian of content and the content strategy. It's making all the important decisions about how content is created/collected, managed, published and curated.

- **It's a system.** It's not a technology, though it can be technology assisted. It describes an organic system that covers content from cradle to grave and all the iterations along the way.
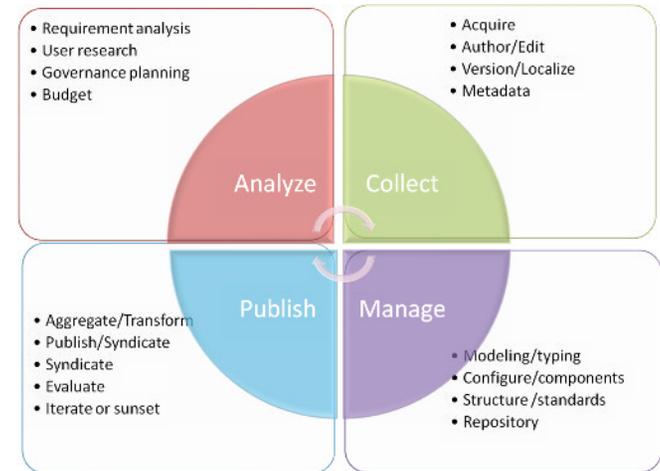
Benefits of a Content Strategy

Having a content strategy acknowledges that content is an asset and needs as much asset management as the other corporate assets – physical, financial and information. It is also an acknowledgement that managing content is different from managing data or information. Content is more complex and nuanced, and as a result, needs to be governed by its own strategy.

The bottom line for any effort undertaken by an organization is return on investment (ROI) [20], and content strategy is no exception. The expectation is that developing and adopting a content strategy will create a benefit,

Content Lifecyle

Simply acknowledging that content has a lifecycle is a large step for many organizations that traditionally think of publishing content as a linear activity. A content lifecycle is present whether the content is controlled within a content management system or not, whether it gets translated or not, whether it gets deleted at the end of its life or revised and re-used. The content lifecycle covers four general areas: the strategic analysis, the content collection, management of the content and publication, which includes post-publication maintenance and a loop back to analysis for the next cycle.

- Requirement analysis
- User research
- Governance planning
- Budget

Analyze

- Acquire
- Author/Edit
- Version/Localize
- Metadata

Collect

- Aggregate/Transform
- Publish/Syndicate
- Syndicate
- Evaluate
- Iterate or sunset

Publish

Manage

- Modeling/typing
- Configure/components
- Structure /standards
- Repository

either through increased revenue or operational savings. This rationale is the fundamental for any asset management through an organization. The Institute of Asset Management [21] defines asset management on its website as "the art and science of making the right decisions and optimizing these processes" to determine "the operational performance and profitability of industries that operate assets as part of their core business." From this point of view, having a content strategy puts into place a framework that allows organizations to measure investment and results.

These measurements are highly situational and are generally tied to an organization's marketing or operational goals. A content strategy allows an organization to look at effort throughout the content lifecycle. If the content is tied to entering a new market, with a resulting increase in sales, the ROI becomes readily apparent once the numbers have crunched. If the goal is operational efficiencies, the payback is in terms of internal rate of return [22]. The investment in a content strategy can be measured by shortening the turn cycle, savings in translation costs or a number of other possible operational goals.

Likely the best benefit of a content strategy is the peace of mind that comes with knowing that your content assets are present and accounted for and that you can use them to their fullest potential without the machinations and tribulations associated with ad-hoc or rudimentary systems. ■

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