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RETURN OF THE CONTENT KING

All Hail Web Content Strategy, the King's New Form

by Kelley Rand, Content Director, Malenke|Barnhart

There's a new kind of King in town. It lacks the visual star-power of Web design and the reverence-inspiring complexity of Web development. But hear this: This newcomer will change the way you do business online.

We're talking about Web Content Strategy.

Stay with me here. While it's not glamorous (I warned you, remember?), you will want to know about this must-have practice when the time comes to transform an unruly website into a user's online ideal.

WHAT IT IS

Awareness of Web Content Strategy is just taking hold. Like Information Architecture a decade or so ago, this up-and-coming discipline hasn't yet made it to the mainstream. So let's put it on a map:

- In corporate environments, Web Content Strategy fits under the marketing umbrella within your Internet or User Experience (UX) group.
- Within interactive agencies, Web Content Strategy is part of your User Experience (UX) team.
- In both cases, it interfaces directly with Information Architecture (IA) and Interaction Design, and is an integral part of the Web development process.
- It's different from Web Copywriting, which falls under the Creative group.
- Content Management is related, but as a subset.

WHAT IT INVOLVES

This nascent industry defines Web Content Strategy as *planning for content creation, delivery and governance*. The practice encompasses a wide range of tasks:

- Understanding a customer's online and business goals
- Identifying a voice and messaging strategy to support the brand and User Experience (UX) vision
- Inventorying existing content

- Analyzing content needs
- Identifying the gap between content needs and existing content
- Determining what content to keep and what content to remove
- Identifying and sourcing new content
- Estimating content project costs
- Lining up content creators, including Web writers and editors
- Scheduling content delivery
- Incorporating metadata into the site for basic search engine optimization
- Creating an editorial calendar for content refreshes
- Writing a style guide and/or content standards for architecture and messaging consistency
- Planning for content archival
- Using site analytics to gage the content's success
- Adapting the content as needed to achieve site goals

HOW IT WORKS

This new way of thinking about content transforms the way website projects run. The days of content being an afterthought or a procrastination target are over. In their place lies a proactive, strategic, user-centered approach that's:

Collaborative

Key to your project's success is the cooperation between the players on your User Experience team. Your Web Content Strategist will interface with the:

- Client to garner a complete understanding of the project objectives
- Information Architect in creating the site map and wireframes
- Interaction Designer in ensuring the site's usability
- Information Designer in making sure the content and layout harmonize
- Technical lead to make sure that the content and CMS work together

Comprehensive

Your Web Content Strategist will manage the entire content planning, creation and publishing process from start to finish, ensuring that your content—so often the culprit in launch delays—will be accurate, strategic and on-time.

Long-Term

Since websites are often outdated the moment they're launched, the Web Content Strategist stays engaged, keeping a list of follow-up projects,

implementing the maintenance plan and recommending site updates based on metrics. It's a lasting partnership that aims to keep your content current at all times.

WHY YOU SHOULD DO IT

It's not unusual to find websites today with hundreds—or even millions—of pages of content. Patched together over a decade or more, much of this content is outdated, irrelevant, redundant and inaccessible.

While they may know they have a problem, the owners of this content, understandably, don't know where to begin in cleaning it up. Maybe they embark on a redesign project, but still, what to do with the content?

Project Benefits

The only way to solve this problem is through Web Content Strategy. As important as architecture, design and development, Web Content Strategy can make the difference between a failed or successful website redesign.

When incorporated into a project from the beginning and given adequate resources, Web Content Strategy can ensure that:

- Brand messaging is conveyed consistently and successfully
- Website users' needs and expectations are met, increasing conversions
- Irrelevant and redundant content is eliminated
- Fresh content rotates in, and outdated content is archived
- Redesign projects are profitable and completed on-time
- Content is optimized based on ongoing analytics tracking

Whether you're creating a site that has 30 pages or thousands, this essential practice fills a sizable hole in the Web development and maintenance process, making your life easier and your project cost-effective.

User Benefits

More than that, Web Content Strategy enhances users' online experiences. It ensures that content is:

- Organized into categories that make sense to users
- Labeled in terms that they understand
- Written specifically for the Web
- Easily accessible via clear calls to action
- Accurate and fresh

Users visit websites to DO something. Web Content Strategy helps them accomplish their goals quickly and easily. This increases the likelihood that they'll have positive experiences on your website—and that they'll visit again.

HOW TO DO IT

Start from day one. Bring in a seasoned Web Content Strategist and include him or her in your planning meetings. Let this person get immersed in the project, digesting audience details, competitive analyses, project objectives and business requirements. Provide access to stakeholders and research findings. Turn him or her loose to inventory the existing website. And then watch the strategy and execution unfold as the project progresses.

Web Content Strategy Process

In typical Web development projects, there are five phases. Here's how Web Content Strategy plugs into these phases and what specific content questions may be answered in each:

1. Discovery

- Who are the primary personas?
- What messages will we convey?
- What tone should the site speak in?
- What existing content do we have?
- What new content will we create?
- What content will we eliminate?

2. Analysis

- What competitive content exists?
- What are the existing content's strengths and weaknesses?
- What is the current content process?
- What resources are available to create or source content?
- How long will it take to produce it?

3. Design

- Who will create and edit the content?
- Who will review and approve it?
- What guidelines will we provide?
- Will the content be translated?

4. Build

- How will we handle unexpected issues?
- How will we migrate current content?
- Who will input content into the CMS?
- Will we conduct user testing?
- How will we perform quality control?

5. Maintenance

- When will we update the content?
- When and how will we archive it?
- How will we track the content's performance?

Choosing a Content Strategist

Seeing your content project through to a successful completion is a big job requiring specific skills and experiences. When hiring a Web Content Strategist, look for:

- Significant experience writing, editing and managing Web content
- Large-scale Web project management expertise, including experience creating and maintaining content matrices
- Professionalism in interacting with company stakeholders and subject-matter experts
- Experience guiding teams of Web Copywriters in creating strategic brand messaging
- An understanding of how to develop meta data and implement search engine optimization best practices
- Knowledge of building and using style guides and content standards
- Familiarity with estimating and scheduling tasks and tools
- Skill in analyzing website metrics to recommend content improvements

With the right Web Content Strategy process and person in place, your online content will cease to be a perennial problem. It will take its rightful place as a key strategic asset.

You've heard the expression "Content is King". Well, now that Web Content Strategy has come to town, we get to see the young King all grown up. No longer a naive kid, it's sporting a new, wiser outlook and long-term view. Welcome, good King. We've been waiting for you.

WHAT IS WEB CONTENT?

Much more than text on a page, content includes:

- Words
- Photos
- Video
- Audio
- Demos
- Games

- User-generated content
- Downloadable files
- Icons and logos
- Link and button text
- Navigation labels
- Meta data

“Content strategy is to copywriting as information architecture is to design.”
—Rachel Lovinger

MORE INFORMATION

Online Resources

- A List Apart articles:
<http://www.alistapart.com/topics/content/content-strategy/>
- Business Exchange site:
<http://bx.businessweek.com/content-strategy>
- Facebook group:
<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=106746755328>
- Google group:
<http://groups.google.com/group/contentstrategy>
- LinkedIn group:
<http://www.linkedin.com/groups?gid=1879338>

Books

- *The Web Content Strategist's Bible*
by Richard Sheffield
- *Content Strategy for the Web*
by Kristina Halvorson

About the Author

Kelley Rand is Content Director for Malenke | Barnhart (www.malenkebarnhart.com), one of the region's leading digital agencies. She has 20 years of content and copywriting experience working strategically with national clients such as Qwest, Microsoft, AT&T, and HP, as well as locals like the University of Denver and Denver Zoo. She effortlessly balances organic creativity and digital rigor to create exceptional Web Content Strategies. Feel free to contact her with questions at kelleyr@mbarnhart.com.