

Promise

Online content has the potential to communicate key messages, build relationships, enhance a brand and close a sale by enabling interactive dialogs that engage the user.

Reality

Content is often an afterthought in the web development process. Rather than playing a core role in the initial strategy and planning phases, it is relegated to the latter stages of a project when copy development begins.

Problem

When content strategy is an afterthought, both client goals and the user experience suffer, and the potential of the website to be used as an effective communications channel is weakened.

Solution

Build digital dialogs that engage your users by focusing on content goals early in the development process.

Abstract

No matter how beautifully designed or technologically complex a website may be, it is still the words within a website that directly speak to the end user, in effect, creating a digital dialog with them.

When developed correctly, content provides priceless value to an organization's website. Not only does it set the contextual framework for the online experience, but it can also boost credibility, enhance a brand, and enable a purchase. To take advantage of the Web as an effective communications tool, a site's design and architecture should be driven by a solid content strategy, not the other way around. This paper defines the Content Strategy process and identifies core services that help organizations best use the Web as a powerful communications channel.

Introduction

In November 2004, *The New York Times* reported that, for the first time ever, those online spent more time reading articles and watching videos than communicating via email and instant messaging. While people may read less online than they do in print, the fact is that they do indeed read online and they are reading online more than ever.

If this is true, then we all must ask, "How would I rate the content on my website? Does it convey a clear message? Does it speak to my audience? Does it create a dialog that will benefit my business?" Unfortunately, the answer to these important questions is often a resounding "No."

The problem is not that organizations do not care about their message. On the contrary, most organizations dedicate large budgets to traditional advertising and public relations services. More often, the problem is that they treat their website as if it were a traditional form of mass media. Philosophically, however, the Web is quite different, and it is this difference that affects both the message and the receiver.

Content Strategy – the process of determining and identifying a website's key messages; creating, sourcing and integrating content that supports these messages; and developing a content maintenance plan.

Digital Spaces, Digital Dialogues

The Changing Media Environment

Let's first define the term "digital content." Whether on the Web or other mobile device, digital content can be defined as any editorial or multi-media element that conveys a specific message to a receiver. Unlike traditional media, the dynamic, systemic nature of the digital environment has complex implications for communication. Where once a message traveled along a sequential path from sender to receiver, digital messages travel in circuits.

The Web changed the dynamic of the traditional communication sequence, and with it, the role that content plays in the public sphere. A different form of mass media, digital content enables communication on more than just one path, moving the reader into a more powerful role and creating the potential for dialog.

From One-To-Many to Many-to-Many

As publishing and advertising developed in the latter half of the 1800s, a "one-to-many" messaging model became the standard. As mass communication grew, the burgeoning media deconstructed the barriers of

time and space by allowing messages to travel. No longer did a message have to wander from mouth to mouth – now everyone had instant access to the same information.

Then came the World Wide Web, and with it, an even deeper deconstruction of time and space as well as an intrinsic change in communications. No longer were people connected to the messenger in a one-way dialog. Now they could do two things they could not in the past: They could speak back to the messenger and they could speak directly to each other.

Interacting with today's consumer

Smarter and savvier than ever, today's consumer won't settle for the advertising of years past. According to a study by Yankelovich Partners, 69 percent of U.S. consumers are "interested in products and services that allow them to block, skip or opt out of advertising and marketing messages." This does not mean that consumers are uninterested in finding out about new products, but it does show a change in consumer behavior.

In fact, 61 percent said that in exchange for no advertising, they would be "prepared to do more research to find out what's on sale" (Yankelovich Partners). Among luxury consumers, the Internet beat out newspaper ads, television programs, commercials and magazine ads as "very or somewhat important," according to research by Unity Marketing.

Consumers today seek to be educated, and they seek to find their own identity in the brands they consume. In this environment, the most effective approach is not a hard sell through one-way communication. Rather, it is the two-way conversation that occurs through a digital dialog.

Communication as a circuit

Unlike a printed brochure or a television commercial, the Web operates as a circuit, with a fully engaged feedback loop. In this system, a reader is no longer simply a reader. Now they have the potential to be an author as well. It is up to the organization building the website to define the ways in which they would like to engage their consumer in this new form of communication.

The range of possibilities is wide. From polls and surveys to RSS feeds and blogs, the Web allows for a full spectrum of interactions based on content. As the user moves from reader to author, the potential for agency and creativity is increased. At the same time, the ability of an organization to control site content is decreased, so it is essential that the correct content strategy is developed for the organization's needs.

Recent communications theories claim that society is moving into a post-literate era where concepts of time and space are more akin to those in tribal communities. For example, the circular mode of communication enabled by HTML is similar to the ways in which stories are told in certain tribal communities, where the past, present and future occupy the same storytelling space. Text messaging has also challenged spelling and literacy on a different plane. A new language of sorts is emerging as words are created out of a combination of letters, numbers and symbols.

Thus, communicating in a circuit changes the way in which effective messages must be crafted and delivered. When a message moves from an offline to an online environment, a transition process must take place. Understanding the dynamics of this transition is vital to the success of a website.

The Value of Online Content Strategy

"Words matter," said cognitive scientist and linguistics professor George Lakoff in the July/August 2004 issues of Sierra Club Magazine. "It is extremely important that people use language in a powerful way."

This could not be any more accurate than in the digital realm, where entire relationships are built through words and messages.

While the benefits of a solid online content strategy are many, there are four main ways in which such a strategy can benefit an organization: It can boost credibility, attract an audience, enhance a brand and enable a purchase.

➔ **The Content-Credibility Connection**

Over the past 50 years, many studies have been conducted on credibility and content. Communications researchers have found that credibility is comprised of numerous elements, from expertise to believability, and that these elements significantly effect whether a message is accepted by a receiver. In the digital realm, credibility is a highly sought after attribute, as it builds relationships in a faceless world.

It is no surprise then, that credibility plays a key role in eight of the nine factors for deciding to visit a website as noted in a Consumer WebWatch survey conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates. The survey revealed that 80 percent of those polled said that, "being able to trust the information on a site is very important". Of the nine factors listed in the survey and the table below, a robust content strategy can address six (factors 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7).

| Nine Factors in Deciding to Visit a Web Site | |
|--|--|
| 1. | The site is easy to navigate and to find what you want |
| 2. | Being able to trust the information on a Web site |
| 3. | Being able to easily identify the sources of information on a Web site |
| 4. | Knowing the Web site is updated frequently with new information |
| 5. | Being able to find out the important facts about a Web site |
| 6. | Knowing who owns the Web site |
| 7. | What businesses and organizations financially support the site |
| 8. | The site displays seals of approval from other groups |
| 9. | The site displays awards and certificates from other groups |

The Stanford Guidelines for Web Credibility show similar findings. Of their 10 guidelines for boosting the credibility of a website, the majority are directly related to content.

| Stanford Guidelines for Web Credibility | |
|---|---|
| 1. | Make it easy to verify the accuracy of information on your site. |
| 2. | Show that there's a real organization behind your site. |
| 3. | Highlight the expertise in your organization and in the content and services you provide. |
| 4. | Show that honest and trustworthy people stand behind your site. |
| 5. | Make it easy to contact you. |
| 6. | Design your site so it looks professional (or is appropriate for your purpose). |
| 7. | Make your site easy to use – and useful. |
| 8. | Update your site's content often (at least show it's been reviewed recently). |
| 9. | Use restraint with any promotional content (e.g., ads, offers). |
| 10. | Avoid error of all types, no matter how small they seem. |

In addition to providing the right types of information in the appropriate way, there are a number of factors that affect how a message is received in a digital environment. Elements such as tone, voice and style all affect how a message is perceived.

In fact, “sites were rated more credible when they had standards for their content,” according to the Stanford-Makovsky Web Credibility Study (2002). In addition, publishing content created by users, such as reviews, opinions, and ratings has been shown to add credibility to a website, the study reported.

➔ The Stickiness Factor

Websites have the ability to attract and retain an audience by creating “sticky” content. That means that users will visit a website, and will stay longer, if there’s meaningful and useful content to engage them. Attributed to high-speed Internet access, the notion of using content to attract users is gaining in popularity.

Sticky content may range from intriguing articles to surveys to message boards. Understanding your audience and what they are seeking is essential when creating content that will attract them to your site.

In addition, sourcing appropriate content is another important element in the process of creating digital dialogs. Media organizations have long been familiar with syndicating content, however as businesses create content heavy websites, syndication may also provide a smart option for sourcing sticky content.

➔ The Brand Enhancing Element

Digital content has the ability to carry and enhance a brand message. This is important not only for B2C websites but also for B2B sites. Through content features, navigation and copy, digital content provides a voice for the site experience.

Take a look at the two examples below – can you tell which one is from a clothing retailer and which one is from a computer retailer without any reference to the product being sold?

“Smart, not stuffy. That’s the name of the game this fall.”

“A diverse selection of reliable solutions and unparalleled value.”

From words to grammar, an organization’s website must portray a voice that resonates with its target audience. Understanding the user early in the development process provides insight into how to engage with them through content features as well as through the appropriate tone and style.

➔ The Purchase Path Enabler

Unlike any other form of media, websites have the ability to close the sale on e-commerce sites, according to Forrester. While other forms of media create awareness and generate interest, a website can actually engage the user in the two-way dialog that provides the information needed for them to complete a purchase.

In an e-commerce environment, users can find information about a product or service and read reviews from third parties, such as other consumers. It is content in the form of words, product images and other multi-media elements that creates this environment. By providing this level of detail not found in traditional media sources, a website has the ability to “drive the interaction to completion,” according to Forrester.

Challenges, Solutions and Common Pitfalls

Unlike traditional mass media, where communication travels a one-way path, content on the Web is more complex. Often, multiple messages must speak to multiple audiences within one website. Tone, voice and style must be carried throughout hundreds, if not thousands, of pages. Communicating in a dynamic online environment also puts the control of entry and exit points into the reader's hands. Concise yet complete, consistent yet engaging, a website's content must meet many objectives.

Online content challenge fall into four main categories: messaging, sourcing, creating and maintaining.

■ Messaging

challenge

What do you want to say? Whether preparing for a business presentation or a birthday toast, for the best results, the key message must be identified before speaking. In the digital realm this is no different. Key messages must be identified at the beginning of a site's development, so that technology, architecture and design can support these messages in creating an overall experience.

Messaging is not simply about choosing the right words. It's about clearly identifying the key messages and creating a contextual framework that supports those messages. This is true not only for B2C sites but also for B2B, knowledge management and educational sites. Beginning with this phase of content strategy ensures that a website will be best optimized as a communications channel.

common pitfalls

Messaging is often considered after the technology, structure or design has been developed, forcing key messages into an existing structure which may or may not work.

solution

The messaging phase includes a number of tasks, often beginning with user research to define and understand the audience, as well as content strategy workshops to identify key messages. Once messages are identified, a content inventory and audit is conducted which accounts for all relevant online and offline content elements an organization possesses. Also included is an audit of their potential value in conveying the identified messages. Next, a matrix of content types and features is developed which meets the site's objectives and the user experience goals. Finally, a tone and style guide is created so that copy supports the messaging goals.

■ Sourcing

challenge

Websites often consist of hundreds or thousands of pages of content. Where is your content coming from? Online content may have numerous sources – it may be rewritten from a brochure, it may be integrated from a syndicated source or it may be created originally. The challenge is in understanding which of these options, or combination of them, best meets an organization's needs.

solution

The sourcing phase of content strategy begins where the content inventory and content audit leaves off. By conducting a gap analysis, missing content is identified, and potential content sources, including the organization, the Web agency and third-party syndication are assessed. Finally, a comprehensive plan for sourcing and developing content is created that meets the development goals of your organization.

■ Creating Content

challenge

Creating content can be a daunting task. It requires pulling together numerous sources, understanding how information works together and repackaging it for a digital environment. There are numerous editorial concerns when writing for a digital environment. For example, a specific tone or set of tones must be infused throughout the site. This often means rewriting content from various sources so that the voice carries throughout the user experience. In addition, content must be edited so that it reads well in an online environment. This often means writing within strict character counts as well as guiding users through an application with copy. Writing for the Web also requires an understanding of its dynamic nature. As readers move through various sections of the site, content must communicate key messages without seeming repetitive.

common pitfalls

Organizations often try to use internal sources who are not professional writers. While these resources would never write a print brochure or produce copy for an ad, they are entrusted to develop content for the website – a much more complex medium.

solution

Using the right resource for creating content that supports key messages is essential to the success of your website as a communications channel. As noted above, the writer must understand the dynamic nature of the Web and write for the medium while integrating the correct tone and style throughout numerous pages and sections. In addition, understanding the legal implications of copy and working with legal counsel in the approval process is an important aspect of content development.

In cases where content must be developed internally, a content strategist or copywriter will produce a comprehensive guide. This guide helps writers understand the correct tone and style, so they write within correct character counts and other parameters.

■ Maintaining Content

challenge

Maintaining content is a challenge every organization faces. Keeping content fresh, for both user experience and legal reasons, must be a priority. To succeed at this task, a clear plan that speaks to tone and style issues as well as schedule and process issues must be in place.

common pitfalls

Creating a website often means additional work for existing internal resources. Skipping this step puts you at risk for out-of-date or inconsistent content and a website that degrades in quality over time.

solution

Developing a content maintenance guide which outlines the tasks needed to maintain a site, as well as the schedule, is an important step in keeping a website fresh. A content strategist creates and integrates this guide into a content management system, working with technology to set permissions and workflows. In addition, a content strategist may create meta-tags and other “invisible” content that will enhance the site’s search engine performance.

Conclusion

Communicating effectively online requires an understanding of both today's online user as well as the systemic nature of the Internet medium. In addition to setting a contextual framework for key messages, online content can engage users in a digital dialog that advances an organization toward its business goals. Utilizing the process of content strategy, which includes identifying key messages as well as sourcing, creating and maintaining site content, is vital in optimizing the Web as a communications channel.

About the Author



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