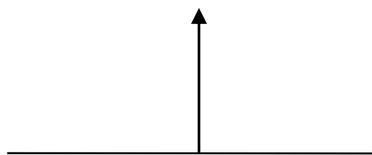


**A Guide to
Understanding, Developing, and
Implementing a Content Strategy
For Your Business**



BIGWORDS
CONTENT DEVELOPMENT

Introduction

Let's get this out of the way right now: it's pretty much a given in the business world today that content is king. More important, content is critical. It is the lifeblood, the identity, and the value of any company or organization. So why is it that content is so often relegated to the backseat? What is it about content that so often makes it an afterthought for otherwise bright, engaged, and responsible professionals?

Perhaps it's the tedium that overcommitted, understaffed sales and marketing executives and department managers have come to expect when it's time to sit down and actually commit digital words to a blank screen. Let's face it – no one really wants to take on the task of trying to think of what to say about a product or service, a company, institution, or organization. Where's the fun in that? Besides there are more important things to do, right? Call a client. Write a sales report. Get those fourth quarter numbers in. Anything other than try to talk about what it is you do or sell so that it makes sense and someone would actually be interested in reading it.

As a result, more than a few otherwise calm, rational human beings become frantic, desperate individuals racing against a deadline to produce something, anything, for a website, newsletter, sales brochure, blog – with little thought and even less planning.

But the truth of the matter is that “content” – that elusive, gray cloud of words, images, and graphics – is the soul of any organization, large or small, profit or non-profit. Without content, there is no brand, no image, no value. A construction without substance, a body without soul. Without proper planning and adequate attention, it's no surprise that the resulting product is unfocused, dull, generic content that creates no unique brand identity, no interest, and no sales.

What's needed is a content strategy and the ability to implement it.

So what *is* a content strategy?

In short, a content strategy is the analysis, creation, publication, and maintenance of useful, appropriate, and current content, developed to meet one or more established goals. While the word “content” is often used today to refer to information developed specifically for a website, it really can apply to any text and supporting graphics created for distribution across any and all channels of a marketing program.

In this e-book, we'll discuss the various aspects of developing a workable, usable content strategy that will help you gain control of the content creation process using a few, simple steps. You'll also gain an understanding of what it takes to generate unique content that will help build your brand, set you apart from the competition, and provide a number of valuable tools for your sales and marketing toolbox.

Understanding Content Strategy

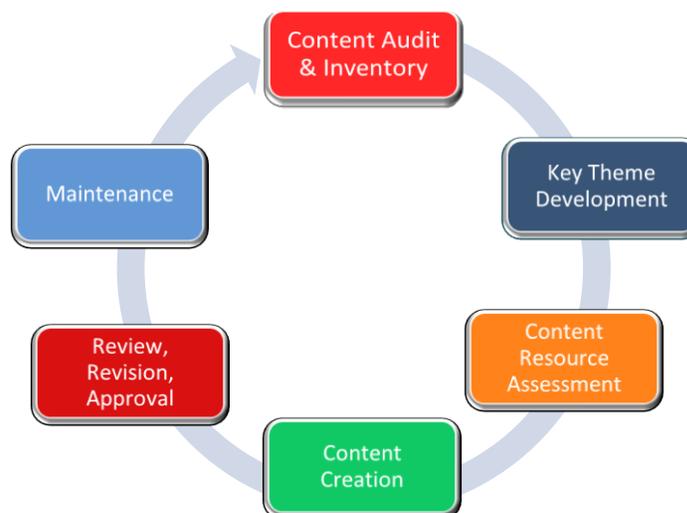
To understand content strategy, you need to understand that creating good content is more than just putting words and pictures together. Good content involves:

-  Understanding your target audience's needs
-  Defining your organizational ability to meet them
-  Setting content goals to address those needs
-  Conducting a content audit to determine what, if any, usable content already exists
-  Assessing what shape that content's in – does it need refreshing or serious overhauling?
-  Determining what new content is required
-  Determining who's going to provide it
-  and where and how it's going to be used

To ascertain all the above, you need to go through the steps mentioned earlier. The result of this process will be an outline of actions needed to successfully produce the valuable content you need without head-scratching, finger-pointing, and frustrating delays.

6 Steps for Creating More Effective Content

While there is perhaps any number of ways to go about creating content, they all boil down to these six basic steps that, in a proactive organization, form a cycle of renewal:



We'll now take a look at how each one of these steps, when completed as thoroughly and accurately as possible, will provide a solid, actionable content strategy grounded in reality while avoiding the pitfalls of assumption and wishful thinking. The first three steps guide the development of your strategy, the second three show you how to implement it.

Developing a Content Strategy

Step I: The Content Audit & Inventory

This is the process of determining what content already exists and its condition. Is it out-of-date, can it be refreshed, does it need to be rewritten, or is it easier to just junk it and start over?

To accurately assess existing resources, you'll need to start by answering these basic questions:

- 📄 Has our company or organization changed?
- 📄 Has our product or service changed?
- 📄 Has the market and/or competition changed?
- 📄 Has our target audience and/or its needs changed?

You may come up with additional questions of your own, based on your specific industry, application and marketplace.

Keep in mind that content is more than just the information you put into your website. Content includes ALL material used to promote your company, products, and services – including printed sales literature, PowerPoint and other presentations, trade show graphics, photographic files, and technical support literature such as white papers. Even if your primary objective is developing a new website or simply revising an existing one, all of these “analog” ancillary materials are informational resources that can be used to create digital web content.

Step II: Key Theme Development

This is where the heavy lifting begins. Before you even begin to write, you need to analyze several key factors that collectively form the addends of a simple equation, the sum of which is – you guessed it – the key theme that will anchor your content strategy:



The first one is, of course, your **customer profile**:

- 📄 *Who exactly are our target customers?*
 - Job title
 - Job description
 - Buying influence

Once you have a clear picture of who you are trying to reach with your content, you need to determine what their “**pains**” are – that is, those key issues that are causing them to lose sleep at night:

- 📖 *What specific challenges (pains) does the customer face that trigger a need for our product(s) or service(s)?*
- 📖 *Specifically, how does our product or service make their pains go away?*

Now that you’ve determined what your customer’s pains are and how you can cure them, you need to put that in context with what your competitors offer:

- 📖 *What is unique about our “**pain relief**” compared to our competitors?*
- 📖 *What do our competitors talk about?*
- 📖 *How can we differentiate ourselves from the competition?*

After figuring out all of the answers to these questions, you’re ready for the final addend of the Key Content Theme equation – **positioning**. You now need to determine the four attributes listed below:

- 📖 This is what’s unique about our product or service
- 📖 This is what sets us apart from the competition
- 📖 This is why we’re uniquely positioned to cure the customer’s pains better than anyone else
- 📖 This is the compelling reason they need to buy from us

Be aware of where your potential customer is in the buying cycle when they receive your content. Are they just starting to look for a solution and need more context and industry or market information, or are they farther along in the decision-making process, enabling you to focus on your solution and how it addresses their specific concerns?

The sum of all this forms the basis of your **Key Content Theme**, providing you with the elements you need to create a unique tagline and compelling content to populate your website and other marketing initiatives.

Step III: Content Resource Assessment

Now that you’ve determined your Key Content Theme, you need to figure out how you’re going to create all that content:

- 📖 Who’s going to be writing the content?
- 📖 Where’s the information for it coming from?
 - “Tribal knowledge” – the collective wisdom and experience of individual employees that may exist only in their heads
 - Existing literature – in-house as well as public sources such as other websites & trade magazines

- ☞ Who's going to gather and manage the information – the writer, the project manager, someone else?

Your content will only be as good as the information used to create it, so proper planning is important. Time and money is easily wasted if someone is not paying attention to where information is coming from, how current and accurate it is, and if it's legal to use it.

Implementing a Content Strategy

Step IV: Content Creation

Now it's finally time to put pen to paper, keystroke to keyboard. If you've hired an outside writer, be sure that he or she understands any industry terms and usage they may encounter in the process. Does your company or organization have a standards manual or written communication guidelines to ensure that your new content aligns properly with the rest of your marketing communications tools?

Create a checklist to help with the details:

- ☞ Identify all products or services with trademarks
- ☞ List correct product or service names and usage
- ☞ List industry acronyms and their proper usage
- ☞ List the proper contact(s) and their information to be used in your new content for any follow-up or response
- ☞ Identify what voice and tense should be used throughout – do you prefer first person or third?

Now you're ready to tackle the actual content. Here's what the process looks like:



Research

This is where you cast a big net and draw in all the fresh data you can. It can come from a variety of places: in-house resources such as sales and product development departments, customers, vendors, the Web, trade and professional associations and publications, you name it.

Take an open approach – much like a brainstorming session – in which everything is considered and nothing is discarded without at least a preliminary review.

By using various sources for information, you're opening up the opportunity for creating a wide variety of content; for example:

- 📖 **Sales Dept.:** *market trends, customer challenges, competitive advantages*
- 📖 **Product/R&D:** *new product developments, product updates, technical FAQs*
- 📖 **Customers:** *case studies, news releases, testimonials, application stories*
- 📖 **Vendors:** *Industry insights, supplier updates*
- 📖 **Aggregators & Syndicators:** *Online sources for competitive news, syndicated content, trend analyses, analyst reports*
- 📖 **Associations/Publications:** *Industry overviews, white papers, case studies, general news*

These are just some of the information source/content synergies that can exist within a typical company – you may have a number of others.

Raw Data Review

Raw information often needs a thorough “going over.” If it originates from within your organization, you need to ensure that it's current and usable:

- 📖 How old is the information?
- 📖 Since its origin, has it been revised?
- 📖 Rejected?
- 📖 Does it still align with the marketplace's needs or your business goals?
- 📖 Does it compromise your market advantage or intellectual property?

If the information comes from outside your company:

- 📖 Is it accurate and reliable?
- 📖 Does it come from a trustworthy source?
- 📖 Do you have permission to use it?
- 📖 Can you legally do so?
- 📖 Can you alter it or combine it with other information to create new content?

Write

With a fresh bucket of information to work with, you can now get creative and use it to produce new content for your website, e-letter, or e-mail campaign. Combine complementary bits of information to create new insights and a fresh approach to a topic or application that will help differentiate your company, products, or services from the competition.

Step V: Review, Revision, Approval

This step is where many projects become critically bogged down. Web developers are particularly susceptible to crippling delays at this stage as clients get stuck on details such as product specifications, third party endorsements or approvals, legal concerns, and any number of copy points that can cause content approval to drag on for weeks and even months. This is often referred to in marketing circles as “death by committee.”

How can you avoid it? By planning early and thoroughly and defining a review process with reviewers, responsibilities, and timetables spelled out in advance.

A typical review process might look something like this for a general B2B marketing content project:



The Initial Review

To keep a content project on track and moving, an initial review should be held as early as possible in the process to catch any basic errors and omissions. This is often handled by the project manager – in a typical B2B company, that might be the marketing director or vice president of sales and marketing who can review the content for completeness and overall accuracy.

For example:

- ☞ Are all the required products and services included?
- ☞ Does the overall tone and text fit with the company’s brand identity and marketing strategy?
- ☞ Does the content align with its purpose and overall marketing goals?

The Comprehensive Review

Once the initial draft has been reviewed and revised for basic style and content corrections, the next step is to review it for specific product or service information accuracy:

- 📖 Are all specifications correct?
- 📖 Are all claims, guarantees, and comparisons accurate?
- 📖 Is all contact information current and correct?

This review ensures the *value* of the new content – is it of compelling interest to the target audience? Does it accurately represent what it is we're presenting to build a strong, unassailable position relative to the competition? At this point, the reviewers should no longer be concerned with style and presentation – they should be focused on accuracy and comprehensiveness.

The Final Review

At this stage, the draft has been reviewed first for correct style, tone, and overall content; then for informational accuracy (product or service specifications, competitive positioning, etc.). The final review provides one last opportunity for correcting overlooked errors, fixing typos, and double-checking contact information before final approval and sign-off. This is NOT the time to second-guess copy points, raise major questions that should have been addressed in the first round of writing and review, or consider a major change in direction or purpose.

If everyone in the review process had been informed early in the project about their responsibilities, what was needed and when, the review procedure should be able to be conducted with minimal delay.

Step VI: Maintenance

This is when many people would say, “Whew! We finally got all that posted. Glad that’s over with!” But they’d be wrong. This is only the beginning.

Now comes maintenance. This involves the same three steps as creating the original content (see Step IV illustration). The purpose is to maintain relevancy, reinforce your brand identity, and provide a means to attract new viewers (and customers) while providing a reason for current customers to come back frequently.

Think of your content as a well-oiled sales tool. If it isn't properly maintained and serviced on a regular basis, it becomes rusty and stops working properly.

Conclusion

So there you have it. Using the six-step content strategy process outlined here, you can develop, create, and maintain better, more effective content – creating useful, valuable marketing communications tools that will deliver a consistent, actionable message to your marketplace.

A good content strategy will help you more easily identify, create, and maintain the various marketing communications tools every company needs to be successful. A workable content strategy enables you to build, populate, and maintain a website more efficiently; build and maintain your brand identity more effectively; and develop new business more easily.

It's never too late to start.

About the Author

BIGWORDS principal **Jim Schakenbach** has over 25 years of writing and marketing communications experience in broadcast and the advertising industry. With a degree in journalism from Washington & Lee University and a career as a journalist, copywriter, and ad agency principal, Jim brings both real life experience and a depth and breadth of knowledge that enables him to write effectively and confidently about a wide range of subjects and industries.



Jim has developed marketing strategies and content for a remarkable range of local, national, and international clients. As a writer, he has turned complex, often highly technical content into clear, concise and compelling stories, creating understanding for the reader and valuable brand identity for the client.

*To learn more about Jim and **BIGWORDS Content Development**, visit <http://www.bigwordscontent.com>*

