Content Strategy 101

Shannon "Just One More Chapter" Ruetsch

The content people consume.

All the work that goes into making sure that the right people see the right content at the right time.

Do any of these problems sound familiar?

- Have we ever had late content delay the launch of a website?

- Have we ever created page templates that look great, but ultimately don't work when the real content goes in?

- Have we ever visited a site we redesigned a few years later and had a "geez, what happened here" reaction?

- Have we ever used Lorem Ipsum in designs because we don't have real content to work with?

- Have we ever had a bunch of opinions on content requirements come out of the woodwork at the 11th hour?

Taking a content-first approach to projects can help avoid a lot of these issues.

What is content?

Content is **helpful information**.

Content can take many forms including web pages, blog posts, audio files, videos, images, presentations, webinars, infographics, PDFs, instruction manuals, webinars, print handouts, and more.

What is content strategy?

"Content strategy plans for the creation, publication, and governance of useful, usable content."

-Kristina Halvorson, CEO and founder of Brain Traffic, author of *Content Strategy for the Web*

SUBSTANCE

WORKFLOW

CORE STRATEGY

STRUCTURE

GOVERNANCE

CONTENT COMPONENTS   PEOPLE COMPONENTS

Original diagram by Kristina Halvorson & Melissa Rach in *Content Strategy for the Web*.

Key components of content strategy*

Core strategy: This defines how an organization (or project) will use content to achieve its objectives and meet its user needs. Sets the long-term direction for all content-related initiatives.

Substance: What content do you need and why? (topics, types, sources, etc.). What messages does content need to communicate to your audience?

Structure: How will your content be prioritized, organized, formatted, and displayed? (IA, metadata, wireframes, linking strategies, etc.)

Workflow: What processes, tools, and human resources are required for content initiatives to launch successfully and maintain ongoing quality?

Governance: How are key decisions about content and content strategy made? How are changes initiated and communicated?

SUBSTANCE — WORKFLOW

CORE STRATEGY

STRUCTURE — GOVERNANCE

CONTENT COMPONENTS — PEOPLE COMPONENTS

*Defined by Kristina Halvorson & Melissa Rach in *Content Strategy for the Web*.

Content strategy is really all about communication.

Content strategists seek to answer these fundamental questions.

- Who do we talk to (target audience)?

- What do we talk about (topics & messaging)?

- How do we talk about it (voice and tone)?

- Where do we talk about it (distribution channels)?

- Why are we talking about this (what is our goal)?

How do you DO content strategy?

1. It often starts with a content audit.

A content audit is a reality check. It's an honest look at where you are today.

There are different types of audits

1. Quantitative audits: What do we have? How much?

2. Qualitative audits: Is what we have any good?

3. Qualitative audits (advanced): Where are our gaps?

What do you evaluate in a content audit?

It depends on the type of audit and your goals. Some of the common things we evaluate include:

- Page Title
- URL
- Content Type
- Metadata
- Traffic
- Last updated date

- Actionability
- Conversions
- Accuracy
- Target Audience
- Readability
- User Journey Step

- User Goals
- Business Goals
- Brand/voice appropriateness
- Primary Message

Doing an audit involves a lot of this

Audits are tedious and time-consuming, and they are worth doing. You'll learn something every time. And, as we all know, you can't guess your way to credibility.

What do you do once you've gathered the data?

1. Time to crunch those numbers, filter and sort, mix and match, and look for patterns!
    a. The specifics of what you analyze will be different for every audit because the goals are different for every audit.
    b. This data will provide you with the rationale to back all of your strategic recommendations.
2. Synthesize those findings into a digestible format (like a deck).

3. Use those synthesized findings to…

2. Create a strategy.

A strategy is an aligned vision of where you are going—a clear, common objective.

What makes up a content strategy?

1. **Core Strategy Statement**

2. **Content Components**

    a. Message Architecture

    b. Voice & Tone Guidelines

    c. Topic Strategy

3. **People Components**

    a. Define the content workflow process

    b. Get alignment on content ownership and responsibilities (governance)

A good core strategy statement is

1. Flexible. It can accommodate various tactics and teams.

2. Aspirational. It's a stretch—focused on your ideal.

3. Memorable. It's easily understood and used constantly.

4. Motivational. It's worthwhile and somewhat exciting.

5. Inclusive. It leaves room for a wide variety of contributions.

Example of a core strategy statement

A lot of people have misconceptions about hospice care. Our job is to share information, based on experience and research. We want patients and caregivers to make the best decisions they can based on the facts.

Our content is targeted towards caregivers of loved ones who are diagnosed with a terminal illness. This does not mean we exclude patients, but we do prioritize caregivers.

Our hospice content addresses all aspects of the end-of-life experience—from what to do after just getting diagnosed with a terminal illness to finding grief support after a loved one passes.

Educate and support caregivers on the end-of-life experience in order to improve patients' well-being at home and in the community.

We want to improve the lives of those nearing the end of their life and their loved ones. This means everything we put out there must be medically accurate and inspire action.

We are focused on keeping patients out of the hospital so they can remain safe and well at home and in the community. We help you stay connected to your life, especially at the end.

21

Message Architecture

What is a message architecture?
A message architecture defines an organization's primary communication goals. These are the things you want your users to remember about you.
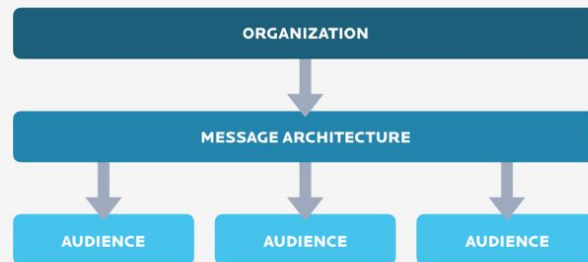
Why is a message hierarchy important?
The message architecture drives a consistent user experience, both visually and verbally.

Inconsistent Communication Without Message Architecture

DEPARTMENT → MESSAGE → AUDIENCE

DEPARTMENT → MESSAGE → AUDIENCE

DEPARTMENT → MESSAGE → AUDIENCE
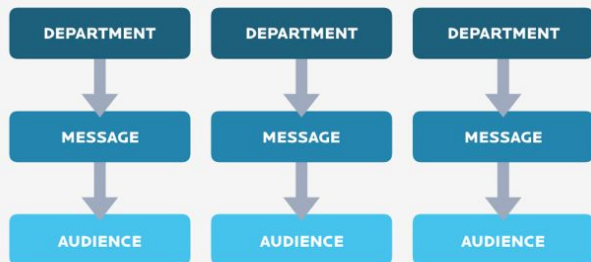
Consistent Communication With Message Architecture

ORGANIZATION → MESSAGE ARCHITECTURE → AUDIENCE · AUDIENCE · AUDIENCE

Example of a message architecture

Primary Message:

- We are the most trusted source of health information for chronic illness.

Secondary Messages:

- We partner with the top experts in chronic care—patient experts and healthcare professionals.

- We believe in the power of stories. Being part of a community is powerful.

- We squash stigma and erase shame around chronic illness everyday.

- We make it easy for you to take action—for yourself, for your loved ones, and for your community.
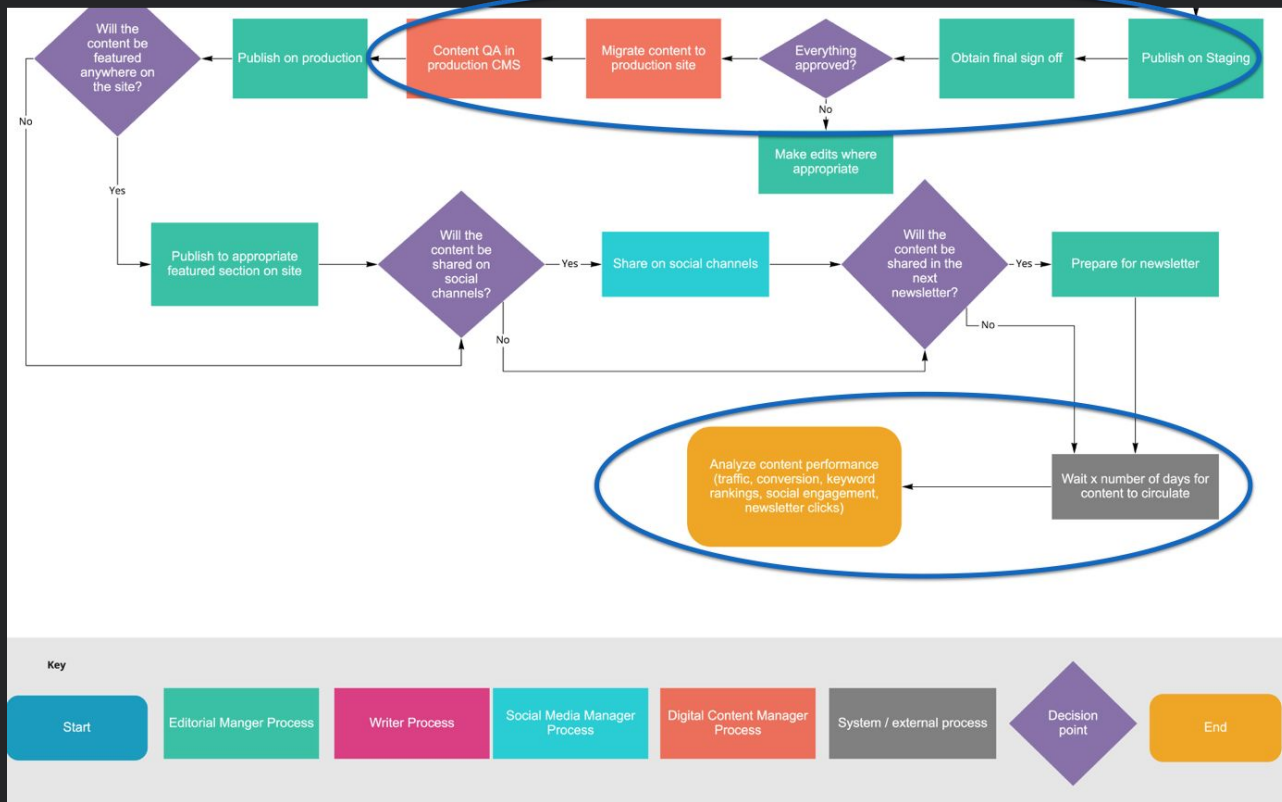
Workflow & Governance

1. Define the process.
2. Designate clear ownership.
3. Make sure everybody knows the rules.

Example of a documented workflow
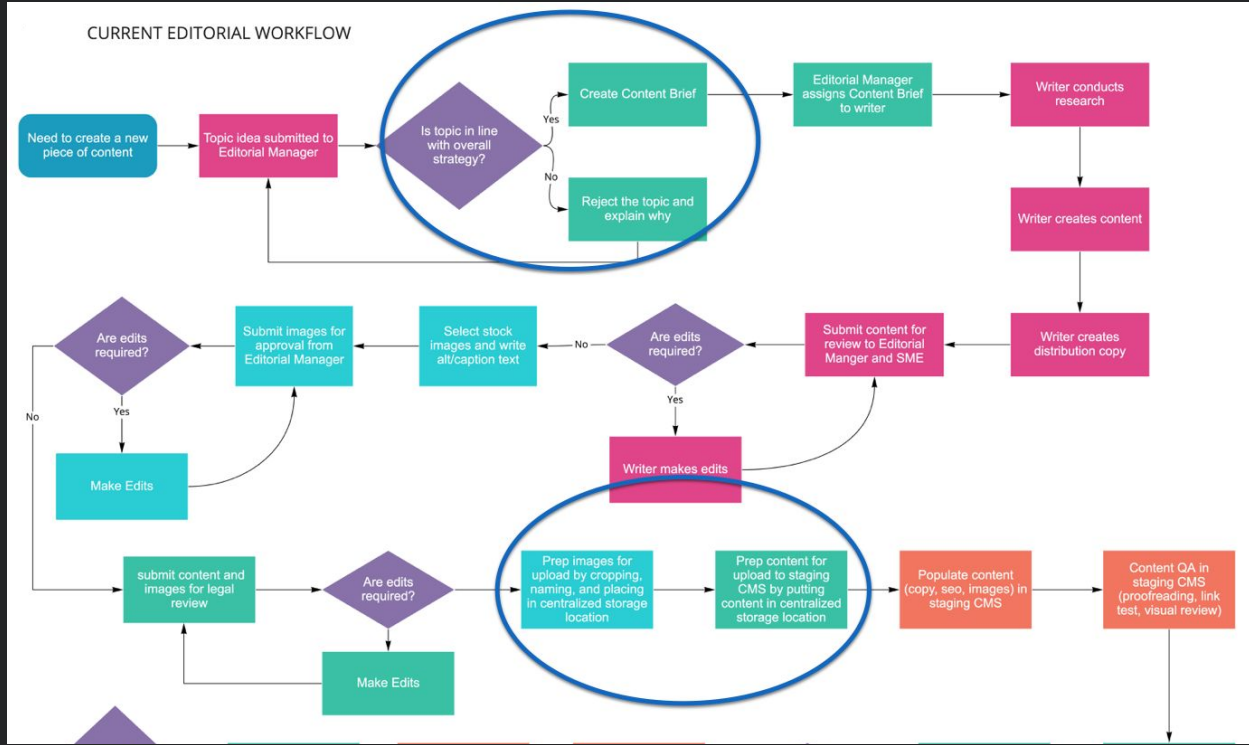
There's more!

3. Make an action plan.

This is how you get from where you are to where you are going. These are the steps you take to move forward.

Every content strategy should include an action plan with specific tactics and recommendations.

Some things you might include in your action plan:

- What user needs the client should prioritize

- What actions the client should prioritize (think low effort, high impact)

- What content to remove / discontinue

- What new on-strategy content to create and in what formats

- What distribution channels to explore or discontinue

Every content strategy should also include specific ways to measure success.

- Set S.M.A.R.T. goals.
  - Specific
  - Measurable
  - Achievable
  - Relevant
  - Time-based

Example of a SMART Goal:

Publish 3 new pieces of content a month in order to increase unique pageviews on the website by 10% by the end of 2019.

So how do you package this all up?

A typical content strategy package includes

- Content Strategy Deck containing audit findings, core strategy, and specific action items
  - Example: HealthCentral Content Strategy
  - Example: TheBody Content Strategy
  - Example: VNSNY Hospice Content Strategy
- Content Audit Data
  - Example: VNSNY Hospice & Professionals Audit Data
- Message Architecture with Voice and Tone Guidelines
  - Example: VNSNY Style Guide

All of these are deliverables we might produce as part of content strategy (not at all exhaustive)

- CMS Requirements
- Competitive Analyses
- Content inventory
- Content style guides
- Content templates
- Core Strategy documentation
- Example content
- Gap analyses
- Metadata recommendations

- Message Architecture
- Personas
- Qualitative content audit & findings
- Quantitative content audit & findings
- SEO Reviews
- Taxonomies
- Traffic analysis
- Voice & Tone Guidelines

What kinds of clients could benefit from content strategy?

Keep an eye out for these signs...

- Clients who don't know how much or what types of content they have
- Clients who have a content-heavy site—sprawling site with thousands of pages, or content spread out over multiple sites
- Clients who have already identified content as an issue, or have gotten burned by content issues on past web projects
- Clients who do not have a plan for who is going to (re)write content as part of a site redesign effort
- Clients who do not have a person who is responsible for overall content quality
- Clients who want to rank higher in search results
- Clients who are aren't able to articulate their mission, brand values, or user goals

What else is important to know about content strategy?

Content strategy is scalable.

Content strategy is flexible.

Content strategy is actionable.

Really, content strategy can be useful at any point in a project

How content strategy relates to…

- SEO work: Keyword research helps us uncover user intent

- Brand work: Make brand values actionable

- UX work: Better informed wireframes, sitemaps, and user flows

- Visual Design work: Prioritized communication goals informs visual design choices

- Development work: Informs CMS Requirements

- Production work: More accurate timeline and budgets. Risk management.

Ideas for leveling up on content strategy

- Figure out how to more effectively include the PEOPLE parts of the content strategy puzzle—workflow and governance

- Integrate our Brand and Content Strategy offering more seamlessly

- Incorporate messaging testing into our process

- Figure out ways to measure content strategy results

My Favorite Resources

- Content Strategy for the Web

- How to Make Sense of Any Mess

- Content Strategy at Work

- Content Design

- Elements of Content Strategy

- Designing Connected Content

- BrandSort Cards

- Information Architecture Lenses

- One Hour Content Plan

"Most people don't come to a website and go — "wow look at this design", or "wow look at this information architecture", or "wow look at this UX!" Users come to a site for the content. They come for information."
-Ben Grose, Content Strategist

Thanks!

Q&A / Discussion
10 minutes

BONUS CONTENT: Common misconceptions about content strategy

- Content strategy is a "deliverable". Once its documented, you're done.
- Content strategy is a list of content to-dos.
- Content strategy mainly involves writing copy.
- It's all or nothing. Either we do the full content strategy, or we don't.
- Content strategy is optional. You can take it or leave it.
- If the client is responsible for writing copy, that means we don't have to think about content at all.

A NICE BIG CUP OF NOPE

BONUS CONTENT: The 17 elements of content strategy*

- **Understanding the organization**
  - Stakeholder interviews
  - Core strategy statement
- **Making content more effective**
  - Content audit, inventory, analysis
  - Editorial style guide
- **Helping content & content creators improve**
  - Content governance
  - Content training
  - Content job descriptions

- **Understanding the audience**
  - Personas, journey maps
  - Content analytics, usability testing
- **Marketing, promotion, and planning**
  - Content planning calendar
  - Search engine optimization
- **Back end structure**
  - Taxonomy, controlled vocabulary
  - Content models, structured content

THE
CONTENT
STRATEGY
PODCAST

*Defined by Hilary Marsh, Carrie Hane, and Dina Lewis on the *Content Strategy Podcast*, Episode 18, April 2, 2019. These three women just conducted an extensive associations research project that led to these findings.