

*Why You Need a Content Strategy*  
by Ciana Wilson

It starts the way nightmares often do. Heat rises to your cheeks. You break out in a cold sweat. A ticking clock echoes in the distance. And it dawns on you: an assignment is due right now and all you have are assorted scraps of writing, doodles, and unread books. A feeling of dread descends upon your being.

This scenario is not far off from the waking experience of many brand managers and marketing professionals charged with providing content for a new website or website relaunch. Even the most experienced professionals quail at the thought of wrangling all of those pesky words, documents, images, and videos. They are experts at communicating about their brands, but they don't know how to organize the brand's information at such a dauntingly large scale.

Enter content strategy—an emerging discipline that moves beyond brand strategy to purely support content, a brand's most valuable asset. In her book, *Content Strategy for the Web*, Kristina Halvorson defines content strategy as “the practice of planning for the creation, delivery, and governance of useful, usable content.” Simple, right?

Not always.

Some brand managers are lucky enough to have thoughtful copy chiefs or user experience designers keeping tabs on the totality of a company's content, but more often than not, content is dealt with ad hoc at best. Content strategy falls into a murky purview at the intersection of copywriting, information architecture, and user experience design, but the sum is greater than its parts. And a strong content strategy is vital to the health of your brand.

*Treat content like your most valuable asset--because it is*

Content is more than the verbal bone structure that supports your brand's pretty face—it's the best way that brands can leverage information to provide value to potential customers. Brand messaging and brand voice still factor into the marketing game, but the way that words interact with consumers has changed. Old-fashioned, aggressive advertising just doesn't work anymore--plus, technology has made it optional at many touchpoints. This means that the best way to attract attention is providing real value to consumers, whether it's social, gamified, or utilitarian. “Content is king” because great content is what consumers want.

But let's face it: when you work in branding, design usually outshines content. The visual is an easy-to-consume, instantaneous way to mentally download information. It's the aspect of your brand that pleases clients the most; it's what your customers chit-chat about online and offline. But to say that nobody cares about content is untrue—it simply has the misfortune of being ill recognized as the lifeblood of an organization. Content strategy is a necessary component of a

healthy, holistic brand and business strategy. After all, design and content must work together in order to provide customers with a positive user experience.

Have you ever visited a website that left you feeling frustrated because you couldn't find what you needed? If you live and breathe online, this experience isn't uncommon—and it's exactly why design and content must work together. While content strategy is not user experience design or web design, it is the piece of the puzzle that brand managers should ideally begin with. Aside from what content goes online and how is it visually represented, content strategy addresses the all-important question of "how much?" Here is one point upon which contemporary design and content strategy agree: Less is more. Always.

### *Break the work into small, digestible bits*

If the nightmarish sense of too much content and too little organization is beginning to overwhelm you, do not fear—once you've chosen to implement a formal content strategy, your path will be lit by solid, actionable steps and tested best practices. To start:

- Put somebody in charge. Think of your content strategist as the Editor-in-Chief of your website—a team leader and single source for all things content-related.
- Perform a content audit. You can't know where you're going if you don't know where you stand right now.
- Analyze your content. Question the necessity of each and every piece of content. Does it say what it needs to say? Is it simple and direct? Does it meet your brand voice standards?
- Develop a strategy. Only once you're rooted in what content you have and how it serves your brand's purpose, you can make informed decisions about where you want to go.
- Keep it simple. Develop a process and stick to it. Let the simple elegance you're hoping to create guide your steps in creating a streamlined content strategy.

Right now, the bar for organized, valuable online content is painfully low. Brands have the opportunity to distinguish themselves not only through polished design and clever copy, but also through the beauty of useful, usable content.

For more information about content strategy, read *Content Strategy for the Web* by Kristina Halvorson and Melissa Rach, or find Kristina online at <http://blog.braintraffic.com/>