

Content Strategy

A large, stylized, blue letter 'C' is positioned in the bottom right corner of the cover. The background features a network of white lines connecting circular nodes of varying sizes, set against a dark blue gradient. Large, overlapping, light blue circular shapes are also present, creating a layered effect.

Imprint

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About This Book

If content is king, then the art of messaging is what will drive your product, business or idea forward. This comprehensive eBook delves into the world of content, providing beginners as well as communications professionals with a fundamental understanding of how content strategy works both independently and in conjuncture with other elements. Learn how to plan and execute ideas, work within specific design parameters and coordinate branding and copywriting with your own efforts. Content strategy is a powerful tool that can range from being a framework governing all aspects of communications to a method of contacting a specific group of individuals. The expert authors of this eBook bring this topic to life with real-word examples and detailed explanations.

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The Immersive Web And Design Writing

BY RIAN VAN DER MERWE 🍷

I have an idea for a new product — can I tell you about it? It will take months to develop, and even though this kind of thing is usually given away for free, I'm going to charge for it. Oh, and the market for it probably won't be very big... Wait, come back! Where are you going?!

It does sound like a crazy idea, but it's exactly what a small group of designers and writers have been doing for the past year or so. On a Web littered with SEO-ified headlines ("17 Jaw-Dropping Responsive Design Templates and Funny Cat Pictures"), easy-to-share design gallery slideshows and quick tutorials that help you recreate the latest texture fetish in Photoshop, these people are taking a step back from what we have now come to refer to as the "fast Web." In the words of Jack Cheng¹:

"What is the Fast Web? It's the out of control Web. The oh my god there's so much stuff and I can't possibly keep up Web. It's the spend two dozen times a day checking Web. The in one end out the other Web. The Web designed to appeal to the basest of our intellectual palettes, the salt, sugar and fat of online content Web. It's the scale hard and fast Web. The create a destination for billions of people Web. The you have two hundred twenty six new updates Web. Keep up or be lost. Click me. Like me. Tweet me. Share me. The Fast Web demands that you do things and do them now. The Fast Web is a cruel wonderland of shiny shiny things."

1. <http://blog.jackcheng.com/post/25160553986/the-slow-web>



(Image: [Jack Cheng](#)²)

A new wave of publications are avoiding this trap, and they appear almost quaint or old school compared to the fast Web. Or worse, as [n+1](#) magazine points out³:

“But all contemporary publications tend toward the condition of blogs, and soon, if not yet already, it will seem pretentious, elitist, and old-fashioned to write anything, anywhere, with patience and care.”

I’m talking about collaborative print and digital publications such as [The Manual](#)⁴, [Distance](#)⁵, [Codex](#)⁶, [8 Faces](#)⁷ and [Ferocious](#)⁸, and even books such as Frank Chimero’s [The Shape of Design](#)⁹. These publications all have two things in common:

- First, they’re about the *meaning* of creativity and design, more than they are about the *doing* of these things.
- Secondly, they are written with patience and care, and they are designed to be read and enjoyed in the same way.

This kind of thing is, admittedly, a hard sell. There are two main reasons for this.

2. <http://blog.jackcheng.com/post/25160553986/the-slow-web>

3. <http://nplusonemag.com/please-rt>

4. <http://alwaysreadthemanual.com/>

5. <http://distance.cc/>

6. <http://codexmag.com/>

7. <http://8faces.com/>

8. <http://ferocious.com/>

9. <http://www.shapeofdesignbook.com/>

First, we're not trained to spend time doing things with patience and care on the Web. As Robin Sloan points out in his brilliant essay "Fish¹⁰":

"On the internet today, reading something twice is an act of love."

And the reason for this is that we're being fed junk food, and we love it. Clay Johnson talks about this in his book The Information Diet¹¹:

"Driven by a desire for more profits, and for wider audiences, our media companies look to produce information as cheaply as possible. As a result, they provide affirmation and sensationalism over balanced information. [...] Just as food companies learned that if they want to sell a lot of cheap calories, they should pack them with salt, fat, and sugar – the stuff that people crave – media companies learned that affirmation sells a lot better than information. Who wants to hear the truth when they can hear that they're right?"

So, instead of looking for nutrition, we settle for the quick fast-food rush. Short articles fit nicely into lunchtime breaks. They don't distract us from the Twitter feed long enough for us to lose track of the day's most important discussions. Most of all, this bite-sized information effectively manages one of our biggest fears: the sunk cost phenomenon¹², whereby we worry that if we "waste" time on a long piece of writing, we can never get that time back to do something else instead.

Secondly, convincing people to care about *why* they do something is much harder than getting them to learn *how* to do it. One is about meaning, the other is about doing. And only one of these things brings cash directly into the bank account. As Frank Chimero points out in The Shape of Design¹³:

"The relationship between form and purpose – How and Why – is symbiotic. But despite this link, Why is usually neglected, because How is more easily framed. It is easier to recognize failures of technique than those of strategy or purpose, and simpler to ask "How do I paint this tree?" than to answer "Why does this painting need a tree in it?" The How question is about a task, while the Why question regards the objective of the work. If an artist or designer understands the objective, he can move in the right direction, even if there are missteps along the way. But if those objectives are left unaddressed, he may

10. <http://www.robinsloan.com/fish/>

11. <http://www.amazon.com/dp/1449304680/>

12. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sunk_costs

13. <http://www.shapeofdesignbook.com/>

find himself chasing his own tail, even if the craft of the final work is extraordinary.”

The irony in all of this is that taking a break from doing, to look slowly and carefully at why we do things and how they fit into the world around us, will almost certainly make us better at the doing part. All creative pursuits have importance and meaning only through their audience, so understanding that audience and the world it operates in is an essential ingredient in our craft.

At least, that’s what I *think*. But I could be wrong. So, to find out more, I got in touch with some of the publishers who work on these publications and asked them a series of questions about what they’re doing and why they’re doing it. What follows are excerpts from email discussions with the following publishers:

- [Andy McMillan](#)¹⁴, of [The Manual](#)¹⁵;
- [Nick Disabato](#)¹⁶, of [Distance](#)¹⁷;
- [John Boardley](#)¹⁸, of [Codex](#)¹⁹.

Why should you care about what these people have to say? The purpose of this chapter is not to convince you to stop reading articles that help you learn the techniques of your craft. Its purpose is to make the case for a more balanced information diet, with which we all take the time to nourish the parts of our brain that give us much-needed context to understand and effectively use the techniques that we see in galleries and tutorials. So, let’s get to it.

Q: WHAT MADE YOU START YOUR PUBLICATION? WHY DO YOU THINK IT’S IMPORTANT TO DO?

Andy McMillan: “For the past two decades, we’ve done an incredible job as a community of discussing, debating and sharing, all of which has contributed to driving our techniques and technologies forward at a staggering pace. This is the energy that provided us with the Web standards movement, and I would argue we’re on the cusp of another major shift. Web design is beginning to define itself as less of a technical skill, but rather as a mature and distinct design discipline.

¹⁴. <https://twitter.com/andymcmillan>

¹⁵. <http://alwaysreadthemanual.com/>

¹⁶. <https://twitter.com/nickd>

¹⁷. <http://distance.cc/>

¹⁸. <https://twitter.com/ilovetypography>

¹⁹. <http://codexmag.com/>

Our extraordinary passion for prototyping, experimenting, documenting and sharing the *how* has gotten us to where we are today. But we believe that as Web design matures as a discipline, there is an additional requirement for greater discussion around the *why* of what we do. The manual aims to give a home to deeper explorations of our work through sharing stories behind the why of Web design and who we are as designers.”



([The Manual](#)²⁰, Image: [Andy McMillan](#)²¹)

Nick Disabato: “I started figuring out the ideas behind Distance in April 2011, when I noticed a few problems in design writing. Most long-form stuff was either hyperbolic and incendiary, thin on citation and high on personal opinion, or it involved this hand-wavy, un-actionable “it depends” kind of conclusion. But it’s possible for writing to take a confident stand without turning into flame bait – by providing justification and offering a way forward. Otherwise, we risk losing something tremendously important about the exchange of meaningful ideas. This is the gap that Distance hopes to help fill.”

John Boardley: “I started [I Love Typography](#)²², [We Love Typography](#)²³ and Codex all for the same reason: they are ways to share my obsession with typography. I never imagined that these projects would become so popular. I had no grand plan. And that reminds me: I still don’t. I think

²⁰. <http://alwaysreadthemanual.com/>

²¹. <https://twitter.com/andymcmillan>

²². <http://ilovetypography.com/>

²³. <http://welovetypography.com/>

these projects are important simply because type matters. And type matters because words matter — whether they are words that inspire (in prose or poetry), words that guide us (wayfinding), beseech, implore, persuade (advertising) — they all matter. Beyond the fundamentals of legibility and readability, the choice of typeface and the typography, the *mise en page*, imbue those words with a voice beyond words, with a personality that sets the scene. The choice of typefaces is analogous to the music score for a movie — the very same scene made more sober, more exuberant, more frightening, more comical, more beautiful, more inspiring, simply through the accompanying music score.”



(Codex²⁴, Image: John Boardley²⁵)

Q: WHAT HAVE BEEN SOME OF THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES IN GETTING IT OFF THE GROUND?

Nick: “It’s been challenging to have no idea what I am doing. Let’s say you have this principle: you believe that online discourse is degrading, and that design writing could do better by being slower, more thoughtful and more focused on research. How do you work in a way that fulfills that principle? You’d probably get others involved, because leading by example often carves a niche vacuum on the Internet. It probably involves writing; actually, it probably involves *long* writing. In order to keep the scope from getting too insane, you’d probably want to constrain it somehow.

But that’s only the beginning of an avalanche of questions. How do you execute on it? How do authors react to a hands-on editor? How do you make money? Do you sell digital, print or both? How do you market

²⁴. <http://codexmag.com/>

²⁵. <https://twitter.com/ilovetypography>

it? How do you conduct outreach without coming off as a shameless, desperate Willy Loman type? How do you handle fulfillment on the print editions?

All that for well-researched essays about design and technology. Each one of those questions needs to be addressed, because each one is critical to the final success. Every day is a new challenge, a new step forward – all done with the risk that it may never pay off (figuratively and literally).”



(*Distance*²⁶, Image: *Brent Knepper*²⁷)

John: “Launching Codex was quite different from launching the blog projects. It necessitated hiring a small team, paying a small team, finding advertisers and sponsors, commissioning articles, finding a printer, a distributor, choosing paper, doing art direction – the list is endless. I guess the biggest challenge is finding the right collaborators – those who share your vision and those who you can work with night and day without wanting to put a hit out on them.”

Andy: “Of course, it’s been a lot of hard work, but I think a lot of what we might have considered initially “challenging” was negated by having the first issue funded through Kickstarter. While Kickstarter is a great tool for pre-selling an idea into reality, it’s really much more valuable as a tool for gauging interest and support. While we thought The Manual should exist, and friends agreed, we needed the support of the Web design community at large to know there was demand for a publi-

²⁶. <http://distance.cc/>

²⁷. <https://twitter.com/brentknepper>

cation like this. Having The Manual successfully funded through Kickstarter let us know that it was something the community wanted, too.

While there are always a lot of challenges that come with each issue, it's always worth it in the end. What we have so far are three beautiful books, with some of the strongest editorial ever written about designing for the Web by some of the most exceptionally talented people in our field. We're incredibly proud of what we've produced so far."

Q: WHAT ARE SOME OF THE HIGH POINTS YOU'VE EXPERIENCED THROUGHOUT THE PROCESS?

Nick: "The past year of my life has been a ridiculous emotional roller coaster. I haven't felt 'meh' about anything in a very long time. You know the stereotype about startup life being prone to intense mood swings? That applies to Distance, too.

We funded our beginnings on Kickstarter. Our campaign was funded on a Friday afternoon in the dead of winter, a couple of hours before I was about to leave work and go to a gallery show that many of my friends were exhibiting in. After trudging through snow for a mile, my girlfriend and I walked inside to cheering and hugs in a packed room. I couldn't have asked for a better way to celebrate.

Receiving a first draft never gets old. Watching an essay come together is intensely gratifying and humbling. I wouldn't trade it for the world. I throw down everything every single time one hits my inbox. One time I excused myself from a bar at 2:00 am to read the whole thing outside, without a jacket, in the middle of winter, drunk and shivering.

And then, of course, taking a shipment of the print edition feels amazing. Carrying 25 boxes full of six months' hard work by several people is a big catharsis."

Andy: "One of my all-time favorite memories will always be opening the first box of the first shipment of the first issue and holding it in my hands for the first time. As someone who had, up until that point, only created by pushed pixels and writing code, there was an immense satisfaction of seeing months of work distilled into a single physical artefact. All the writing, editing, production, discussions, emails, to-do lists, Skype calls, arguments, debates, victories and celebrations – every one of them was contained in this thing I was holding in my hand.

I get emails every day from people who have read The Manual for the first time, telling me it's changed how they view their work, or motivated them to think differently, or led them to try something different. I'll never get tired of receiving and replying to those emails. It's

been immensely satisfying to know we're having that kind of impact with people."



(The Manual²⁸, Image: Andy McMillan²⁹)

**Q: WHAT IS THE PURPOSE BEHIND THE PUBLICATIONS?
WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE PEOPLE TO DO ONCE THEY'VE
READ IT?**

John: "To be frank, purpose is not something I give much thought to. I enjoy making things. If people find value in what I've created, then the purpose comes *ex post facto*. I've always believed that if you have the opportunity, you should create what you want. There is no guarantee that what you create will find a large audience, but if it does, then you've had your cake and eaten it, so to speak.

Share your passions passionately; never be condescending; don't ever present yourself as an expert (let others be the judges of that). Again, when it comes to what I would like people to do once they've read *I Love Typography* or *Codex*, well, I'd hope that they come out with a richer appreciation of typography; but I have no roadmap for where they should head next. That is best determined by the reader."

Nick: "I hope people learn from our essays, so that they can be more thoughtful and considerate in their own work. It would also be great if *Distance* inspired somebody to write a long essay of their own: this

²⁸. <http://alwaysreadthemanual.com/>

²⁹. <https://twitter.com/andymcmillan>

model isn't exactly proprietary, and I happily invite others to participate.

And if our readers disagree with anything, they should critique the essays. Tell us what you think is wrong about them and what could be done to improve them. We all have blogs — there's no excuse. And we'd love to hear from you; our essays aren't complete without your thoughts."



(Distance³⁰, Image: Brent Knepper³¹)

Andy: “We’re proud to be part of the conversation, to be contributing to and encouraging further discourse about what it is we do and why exactly we do it. We like to think we’re giving a home to more ideas and contributing to the intelligent, critical thinking around our design discipline.”

This is a conversation that's been stewing and bubbling up for a good while now, and we're proud to give a home to part of it. What we hope people do once they've read *The Manual* is to continue doing what we've always done as designers of the Web: discuss, debate and share and, by doing so, continue to drive us forward."

Conclusion

As I wrote and edited this chapter, reading through the responses over and over, it struck me how lucky we are to work in an industry and at a

30. <http://distance.cc/>

31. <https://twitter.com/brentknepper>

time where there is so much passion for the work we do. It is inspiring to realize that these authors and publishers do what they do without knowing whether their projects will succeed. And then it all came full circle as it dawned on me that it is up to us as a community to help them succeed, not just by supporting their projects, but by allowing their passion and the words they put out into the world to encourage us to do *something* about the topics we obsess over every day.

So, maybe what I initially thought was a chapter about design publications is actually a chapter about all of us instead. The point is not just that we should have a balanced information diet, but that the real power of that balanced diet lies in the energy it gives us to get started on our own projects. Seek out these nutritious words. You won't regret it.

☺

Content: A Blessing, A Bubble, A Burden

BY CHRISTOPHER BUTLER 🍷

Everyone is talking about content. Googling the phrase “content strategy” retrieves almost 50 million results — a clear indicator that interest in content is very much in the zeitgeist. By the time you read this, I expect that number will have grown even higher.

But I also suspect that the substance of the talk would be quite different if content were truly respected. I believe this because the way we talk about content is beginning to sound a lot like the way we talk about money.

The Content Bubble

The trouble with this is that we don’t really get money, either. Few are foolish enough to say it aloud, but the actions of many betray a single fallacy that remains the pernicious root of recurring fiscal irresponsibility: that with enough money, any problem can be solved. Removed from crisis, we know this to be untrue. We’ve seen it. We’ve lived through it. Yet, we continue to obsess over how much we have and how much more we think we need.

Money, however, is not simply a quantitative measure of units — a figure that can be repeatedly plugged into an equation until it produces something positive. Money is a representation of value. It is a symbol — not a quantitative measure, but a qualitative one. Indeed, the concept of value is a chimera; it evades objective meaning just as readily from one person to another as it does for the same person from one context to another.



Consider movie tickets: Breaking down a \$10 ticket to its cost per minute — roughly 11 cents for a two-hour picture — gets you no closer to a true valuation of the movie than assuming its initial production costs are a relevant indicator. After all, could anyone seriously argue that its \$200 million price tag made the phenomenally bad film 2012 better than *The King's Speech*, an Academy Award-winning independent production that cost only \$15 million? Neither a movie's length nor its cost can predict value, at least as far as the consumer is concerned. But after the last frame fades from view, ask any moviegoer about value and you'll certainly get strong responses. Duration alone doesn't satisfy. Quality will be the subjective basis on which people decide whether seeing a film is worth \$10. That much is plain to viewers, yet elusive to creators who have other pressures in formulating their expectations of success.

As this simple example shows, when it comes to money, we could certainly stand to distance ourselves from a units-based perspective and consider the story that a qualitative perspective tells. One day, I imagine, it will be clear that our insistence on focusing only on the quantitative was at least in part responsible for the mess we ended up in back in 2008. We may wish for a formula to solve our financial woes, but we know that they are rooted in our system of value, not in our system of measure.

Sadly, the same thing is happening in marketing. Whereas a disconnect between money and value has created disastrous fiscal bubbles, a disconnect between content and value is inflating a bubble of its own. Content — today's currency of attention — has taken the place of money as a panacea. To be sure, vanity is also a factor here. The visibility that an individual or group can have today as a result of content is unprecedented, motivating production when silence might be wiser. But I am more interested here in exploring the inflation of content's business

value than the inflation of egos. After the last recession, we learned enough about bubbles to be able to watch this one inflate from the inside.

As I write this, I'm overwhelmed by content — everything from blogs to books — by marketers, social scientists and others, who are studying in detail the expanding content bubble from their unique points of view, fascinated by the transformative force of creativity on society, especially of course on marketing, but perhaps discounting the fact that they write from within it. Yet writing about the content bubble from within the content bubble is not producing the criticism it should. The complexity of content surely merits study, but my simple understanding of what is happening is this: Because we can create content, we do.

In the first chapter of my new book, *The Strategic Web Designer*³², I set the stage by asking the question, “What is the Web?” and taking the “scenic route” to the answer, however subjective it may be. But I suppose a more accessible definition could be that the Web simply is content. In an article written for SEED magazine³³ about our struggle to manage the information we've produced (among other things), Iris Vargas accounts for the almost incomprehensibly large corpus of digital content in the world:

“As of January 2010, the total amount of digital content that humans had collectively produced was estimated at 1 zettabyte. To put this into perspective, the letter ‘z’ in a standard Word document amounts to roughly 1 byte. A typed page comes to about 2,000 bytes. A high-resolution photograph? 2 million bytes, or megabytes. Add six more zeros and you get two terabytes — the equivalent of all the information contained in the U.S. academic research library. Another six zeros (we’re now at 18) brings us to the exabyte. Five exabytes, according to some scholars, could store all the words ever spoken by human beings. One thousand exabytes equals one zettabyte, the total amount of digital content in the world as of this time last year.”

One zettabyte sure does sound impressive, but its meaning is still elusive. We easily understand megabytes and gigabytes — even terabytes — and we can visualize the space they require by thinking of the portable hard drives we carry around. But envisioning a zettabyte? I'm not sure I can do that in the same way. That's where Eli Pariser comes in. In his fascinating book *The Filter Bubble*³⁴, he offers a bit more detail on the specific kinds of content that account for these numbers:

³². http://www.newfangled.com/the_strategic_web_designer

³³. http://seedmagazine.com/content/article/mapping_science/

³⁴. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Filter_Bubble

“We are overwhelmed by a torrent of information: 900,000 blog posts, 50 million tweets, more than 60 million Facebook status updates, and 210 billion e-mails are sent off into the electronic ether every day. Eric Schmidt likes to point out that if you recorded all human communication from the dawn of time to 2003, it’d take up about 5 billion gigabytes of storage space. Now we’re creating that much data every two days.”

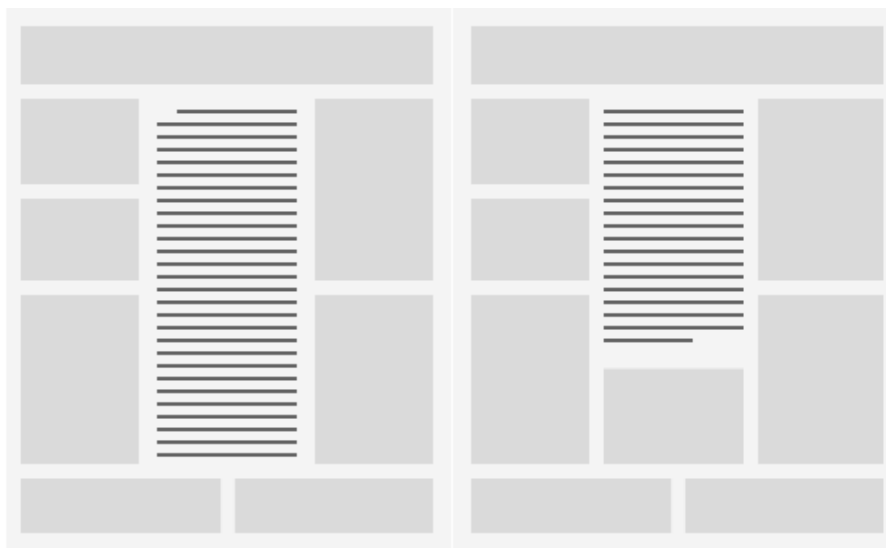
Accounting for the kinds of content that make up this massively growing corpus is helpful — I know what a typical blog post looks like. Granted, much of the content that Vargas and Pariser mention (such as status updates, emails and the like) is not typically what we’d consider Web content, but enough of it is to infer a sobering point: The Web does not need any more content.

And yet, content is the point of every website. For those who design things for the Web, this provides a bit of a paradox, doesn’t it? Amidst a glut of content, one is left to question: What is it all for?

The True Cost(s) Of Content

Our collective prolificacy makes at least one thing quite clear: We value content. Or, at least we think we do. Gaining insight into value, its subjectivity notwithstanding, has always been the pursuit of advertising. And today, the assumption of the value of content — undifferentiated as it is — has been enough to create a new “currency” in marketing (or, to employ a historical metaphor more fitting of the frenzy let loose by Web 2.0, a new Gold Rush). In scrambling to get a piece of the action, we build our marketing strategies upon the same logic of “more” that failed to keep financial collapse at bay: If we create enough content, people will pay attention to us and line up, ready to buy.

But content isn’t free; even lousy content costs something. And if a balance sheet doesn’t include a budget line for content creation, then it’s not detailed enough. Someone is paying for it, in time.



In this regard, content marketing has taken many of its cues from the wrong source: print publishing. The publishing industry – magazines, especially – has been propped up by advertising, which is problematic on two levels. The first is that advertising-subsidized publishing avoids the reality of the true cost of content. Before it even reaches the reader, content gets distorted in value. Without some advertising, readers would have to pay the full cost – something that publishers at some point believed would be impossible, thus creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. This leads to the second problem: that a system that has always depended on subsidies will tend to carve the path of least resistance. Rather than slowly wean off advertising and increase the cost to the reader, it will depend more heavily on advertising and reduce the cost to the reader.

That is, until the ratio reaches an imbalance and readers begin to question why they are paying to see ads. This is a simple law of... well, economics. Before the bubble pops, readers will accept that advertisers have subtle, unspoken editorial control. But as soon as the tipping point is reached, where advertising volume supersedes everything else, readership will begin to drop for one simple reason: readers' sense of value has been violated.

In 2008, when the overall market experienced a significant decline, magazine advertising dropped by almost 12%. That may not sound like much, but when you consider that only 42 magazines saw an increase in advertising of any kind that year, the dramatic reality of the situation becomes clearer. In fact, Folio Magazine pointed out³⁵ that it was the “biggest dropoff since 2000, the earliest year comparative PIB numbers are available.”

³⁵. <http://www.foliomag.com/2009/just-42-magazines-saw-ad-page-increases-08>

I personally remember receiving a much slighter than usual issue³⁶ of Advertising Age in 2009 and chuckling at a sticker placed over the masthead that read, “Marketing in a Recession: It might be only 28 pages, but it’s jam-packed with good advice.” Though I was aware that the previous issues’ bulk was inflated by ads, not by more content, picking up the newly lean and austere 25-page issue certainly made me question my subscription. Advertising, it seems, not only has played an integral role in the economics of publishing, but has also created an illusion of health. I had to see AdAge reduced to almost nothing in order to realize that, for me, the value hadn’t been there for quite some time.

Unfortunately, the imbalance between advertising and content intrinsic to the print publishing industry has not substantially changed in its online form. In fact, it’s gotten worse. Just about every mass media website has an immediately obvious imbalance of ads and content. Take a moment to open an article from your favorite website — you know, [The Huffington Post](#)³⁷, [I Can Has Cheezburger](#)³⁸, [Perez Hilton](#)³⁹ or [Engadget](#)⁴⁰ (which, for better or for worse, are the most popular destinations on the Web today) — and notice how the page is filled mostly with peripheral stuff that has very little to do with the article on the page.

All you have to do is glance at these tiny screenshots to see the obvious imbalance:

³⁶. http://www.newfangled.com/adage_promotion_in_a_recession

³⁷. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/>

³⁸. <http://icanhascheezburger.com/>

³⁹. <http://perezhilton.com/>

⁴⁰. <http://www.engadget.com/>



“Stuff,” by the way, isn’t meant to be casual; it should be the new standard term for content that is carelessly stuffed into every last pixel available to it. After all, when I use the word “content,” advertisements, social media widgets and lures to even more (supposedly related) content aren’t what I have in mind at all. Nonetheless, by force of volume, stuff is evidently what the publishers value more than content. Surveying pages like these, you certainly shouldn’t conclude that enabling users to read is high up on the priority list for online publishers, either. Nor are many other things that readers — or designers, for that matter — hold sacred.

If publishers don’t care whether their websites’ content is read, what do they care about? It’s simple: they care about clicks, because clicks validate advertising. Mass media publishers know that their websites receive such a high volume of traffic that crowding their pages with as many opportunities for users to click makes statistical sense. When hundreds of thousands of users access a Web page on a daily basis, it’s highly probable that a significant number of them will click a link (any link will do) that either prolongs their visit or sends them elsewhere via a paid advertisement.

Both scenarios are valuable to the publisher. A click on an ad... well, that’s just easy money; a click to another page on the website just increases the chance that the visitor will eventually click on an ad. At this

level, it simply doesn't matter whether the visitor's experience with the content is satisfying. For publishers, it is about volume – that's all. The more visitors their websites get, the more money they will make. This is shock and awe; the special ops happen behind the scenes, and there's no hero stuff going on. It's number crunching and content farming all the way up.

It might sound cynical, but quality couldn't factor any less than it does in the content strategy of most mass media. This isn't just true on the Web. The statistical value of volume is at the heart of cable television programming, as well. Cable news, especially, employs the same shotgun tactics of the website publishers I've been describing, except that instead of measuring the value of viewer attention by page views and clicks, they measure it by the amount of time viewers remain dialed in to their broadcast.

By creating the illusion that important news is happening all the time – so much so that a perpetual feed of news runs at the bottom of most programs, while the rest of the screen is divided Brady Bunch-style into smaller boxes of talking heads, social media commentary and, of course, sponsored messages – cable news captures us in a steady yet unsatisfying trance and leads us on with repeated promises that the really important stuff is “coming up, just after this.”



*Image source*⁴¹.

Television has the added advantage of being able to speak, literally, to both viewers and listeners, simultaneously weaving complex and unre-

⁴¹. <http://thepage.time.com/2012/06/01/mitt-jobs-is-the-job-one/>

lated audio and visual messages in and out of its programming, while our brains filter through only the information that is relevant to us. Unfortunately for readers' attention, that just doesn't work well on the Web.

Yet, the advertising-subsidized publishing model carried over from print to Web has worked as well as those who profit from it require. In fact, it has worked so well that advertising-subsidized content has reached an inflection point at which the more apt phrase is content-subsidized advertising. But the term you're likely more familiar with is one I used earlier: "content farming," the process of creating content with such great prolificacy — if not promiscuity — that it becomes purely a platform for advertising.

Put simply, a content farm is distinguished by its prioritization of advertising opportunity over quality of content — a disingenuousness made clear to any user who arrives at one from a search, only to find its articles too brief, too promotional or just too stupid to be useful. Just as there is no such thing as unlawful stupidity, there are, of course, no regulations against stupidity online. Adam Gopnik, commenting in the *New Yorker* on the "cognitive exasperation" of the online experience, puts it in terms⁴² I immediately connected with:

"Our trouble is not the over-all absence of smartness but the intractable power of pure stupidity, and no machine, or mind, seems extended enough to cure that."

Nevertheless, Google will try — the irony of its effort notwithstanding. Though the minds at Google have taken a clear stand against content farming — and, implicitly, for the machine arbitration of quality — by updating its algorithm⁴³ to pinpoint its harvest, content farming is actually a logical extrusion of what Google created in the first place.

This entire system — the complex interweaving of consumer demand for content and various industries' demands for consumer attention — as far as it exists online, has been perpetuated by search engines. Because search engines are best suited to index words, written content has become the focus of marketing.

You've no doubt heard the very popular marketing motto that epitomizes this: "Content is king." I, for one, couldn't think of a worse catchphrase. Forgiving the sense of entitlement engendered by the word "king," shouldn't a phrase like this be aspirational instead, linking content and value in a way that causes us to reach for something bigger than ourselves, better and more true, rather than complacently accept-

⁴². http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2011/02/14/110214crat_atlarge_gopnik

⁴³. <http://googleblog.blogspot.com/2011/02/finding-more-high-quality-sites-in.html>

ing a slave economy in which we almost certainly exist at the bottom? While nothing is inherently wrong with profitably matching user interest to content — specifically, in the various ways in which Google does so — the absence of value as an essential and reliable factor in the equation, as well as the fact that the structure of this economy is strongest when content is text, makes for the instability we are experiencing. Indeed, it has led me to question numerous times, for myself and my clients, whether written content truly is the best way to represent expertise.

Working Content

There are, in fact, plenty of instances in which the written content model is undeniably inadequate. With a few exceptions, most consumer products are not easily marketed with much text. Typically, consumers prefer to let products “speak for themselves” both in usage and in researching their performance in reviews — which, of course, are found in abundant supply on the Web — rather than defer to what the maker has to say about their wares. In most cases, our aversion to being sold to is so strong that we struggle to believe the seller even when we believe in the value of their product!

For instance, do the Marriott and Skittles really need blogs?

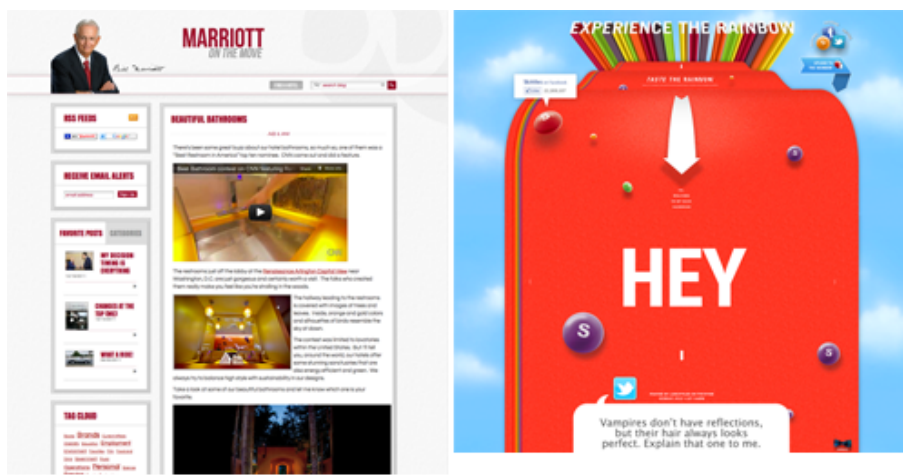


Image source⁴⁴.

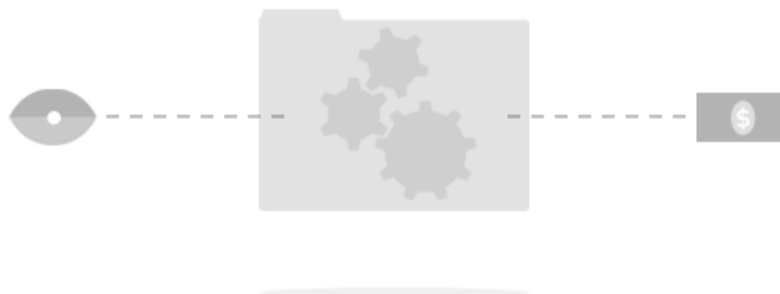
Those in the health-care industry might also perceive reasons to take up content strategies of their own, but often locality and emergency are the primary factors in a consumer’s choice of care providers, rather than researched, advance consideration. Similarly, utility-type ser-

⁴⁴. <http://www.skittles.com/>

vices — plumbers, electricians, mechanics and cleaners — are more likely to be selected on the basis of what is nearby, immediately available and affordable, rather than any pitch that a blog or newsletter may provide. That isn't to say that some form of content shouldn't occupy a piece of the overall marketing strategy; there may be opportunities to use audio, video and social media that could be quite effective, while not being the lead marketing initiative.

On the other hand, there are instances in which written content marketing works quite well. At the products end of the business spectrum, those manufactured for businesses (rather than consumers), are typically heavily researched by buyers — who make active use of search engines to do so — before being purchased. Case studies, white papers, blog posts and other articles can satisfy the researcher's need for sharable, decision-reinforcing information, especially if they are enabling a buying decision that will ultimately be made by someone else. The same dynamic exists within any "knowledge industry" service. For professionals in design, advertising, marketing, public relations, law or finance, the essential intangibility of their expertise must be carefully described in depth in diverse ways to qualify the specific nature of what they do and for whom they are best suited to do it.

I list these considerations in order to point out that our role as strategic advisors to our clients is not to promulgate the latest marketing practices but to diagnose their needs and prescribe the best solution. Content marketing, though essential to the success of some enterprises, is not the best fit for others. Naturally, our own fraught experience in employing content marketing for ourselves may be instructive of that point as well.



To many designers, marketers and other advertising professionals, content marketing presents many challenges, the most dire of which is so

rarely discussed that most don't realize it exists until they've struggled (if not failed) to create content for so long that they're ready to give up for good. The problem is that, when all is said and done — when we've accepted that writing content and optimizing it for search engines is critical to expressing expertise on the Web in a way that increases qualified, likely-to-convert traffic to your website — many of us never wanted to be writers in the first place!

Not every expert wants to write. Yet somehow, we've found ourselves facing the prospect of spending more and more of our time creating content that describes what we do than doing that actual thing we do best, whether it be design or something else. It is this conflict, in concert with other factors — those I've explored so far in this essay having to do with the glut and occasional misappropriation of content, as well as the limited mental bandwidth we each have to filter useful signal from the noise — that often predetermines the parabolic trajectory of many a content marketing plan. What begins with a burst of enthusiasm and creativity rises to an early peak, only to plummet just as fast as it began in rapid stages, from exhaustion to frustration, hopelessness, then bitterness. In the end, in the dysphoric coda, one questions everything: "I'm a designer. Why am I doing this?"

If you have asked that question, whether in a similar struggle or something a bit less dramatic, you are not alone. While some have discovered an affinity for writing and gladly added it to their repertoire, many once-confident designers contend greatly with it, the strain coloring the rest of their professional practice and giving them a feeling of inadequacy that only builds with the decline of their energy.

The rise and fall of the content marketer will almost certainly lead to a redefinition of the role of content within marketing, as well as a redistribution of labor that more closely corresponds to the reality that not everyone is a writer, just as not everyone is a designer. Search engines, which provided the inception of this new writing industry, will also likely provide a needed transition to something more sustainable. As the technology of today is optimized to interpret meaning and expertise from indexable text, the technology of tomorrow will be capable of doing the same thing with content in less tangible forms. Authority algorithms will process sound, video, social media and any other data relevant to discerning expertise — such as tenure, revenue, growth, recommendations, professional certifications — in addition to text, reducing the inordinate pressure on individuals today to make what was once a peripheral discipline in their profession a central one.

Practical Content

In the meantime, creating content remains a challenge we must address practically. If you don't want to do something, you're likely to either struggle doing it at all or struggle doing it consistently and effectively. As I have already discussed, not everyone has the desire to create marketing material, which presents a dilemma to content marketers working today: Those who should do it are often least likely to do it well.

A solution to this predicament is unlikely to present itself spontaneously, nor is any content strategy alone airtight enough to keep creators from struggling. The key is to understand the different roles necessary to fulfill a content strategy in a sustainable way. In her excellent book *The Elements of Content Strategy*⁴⁵, Erin Kissane stresses the importance of discerning between those who conceive the strategy and those who create the content as a means of preserving quality and output over time:

"In its purest form, content strategy does not produce content. It produces plans, guidelines, schedules, and goals for content, but not the substance itself, except inasmuch as examples are required to illustrate strategic recommendations. But if you have the ability to create good content, you'll have a real advantage over content strategists who do not."

This is a significant distinguishing factor that is often overlooked. In fact, while many of the firms I have consulted have enthusiastically adapted the content-marketing approach to their website and quickly conceived of a feasible content strategy, just as many have failed to consistently implement it. This is largely due to a lack of leadership.

A successful content strategy relies less upon the content itself — although that element certainly is essential — than upon a person who is able to inspire those who create the content, coalescing their unique voices around a consistent point of view, even as the stream of conversation around them ebbs and flows. Depending on the size of the team, this person may or may not create content themselves; a truly hard line between roles might not be necessary unless the content output is great enough to warrant one. In my firm, for example, I perform this role, among others, while also producing plenty of content of my own. The more important facet of this role is the authority and responsibility that accompanies it. This person, regardless of the title they carry, must view the direction of the firm's content marketing as being a major part

⁴⁵. <http://www.abookapart.com/products/the-elements-of-content-strategy/>

of their job description. While I came down hard on the print publishing industry for the ways in which its economic foundation devalues content, its editors in chief – whose production, if any, is secondary to their leadership – provide the best example of how this role should function.

For those who create content, of course, the content itself is a priority. But no single piece of content, no matter how excellent, will be as successful as a steady, long-term flow of quality content. This is why the success of any content marketing strategy is achieved by committed leadership.

While the leader's job is first and foremost to ensure that the content's point of view remains consistent with the firm's purpose and that quality is preserved, various management techniques will also be critical to sustaining the production of fresh material. The ways of dealing with the complexity of content marketing will vary greatly according to the size of the organization, but two particular techniques are essential to teams of all sizes: establishing a workflow (the process by which content is conceived, executed, evaluated, approved and delivered) and establishing an editorial calendar (which identifies topics, content types, authors and deadlines in advance). The various points of the workflow process, especially those that place quality control barriers between the content creators and the websites on which their content will eventually be found, are those that require the team to be comprised of a diversity of roles. Kristina Halvorson's book *Content Strategy for the Web*⁴⁶ is a comprehensive enough treatment of the topic to serve as a primary handbook for anyone involved in content marketing, whether leading, managing or producing.

Though strengthened by proactive, intentional leadership and management, your content marketing strategy will still be vulnerable to something that is mysterious enough to slip through the cracks of any well-conceived machine: the creative process of producing the content itself. Writing, especially, is difficult to do well and often. As discussed earlier, it requires a level of focus and investment that sometimes comes into direct conflict with the job you'd rather do, whether that is design or something else. One solution may be to employ dedicated writers, but few marketing teams have that luxury. The reality is that, for now, many designers will have to write and create other forms of content in order to sustain their livelihoods. It is not within the scope of this piece to offer advice on how to write well – there are many fine resources on that topic – but I can share some insight by invoking what I call the nonwritten disciplines of writing.

⁴⁶. <http://contentstrategy.com/>

There are four nonwritten disciplines that make for successful professional writing: reading, planning, research and editing. None can be left out; each is just as important as the other. But if I had to prioritize one, it would be reading.

Reading is a discipline that many books on writing strangely leave out. (The other three — planning, research and editing — are all essential pieces of the content workflow that are covered in great detail by some of the books mentioned in this essay, including my own.) Yet, there is no writing without reading. Perhaps better said, there is no good writing without reading. If you want to write, or need to write — the two need not be in agreement — then you must make reading a part of your life. (If you are thinking to yourself, “I don’t like to read,” then I promise you right now that’s not true; you just have yet to find what you like.)

Any aspiring writer, whatever their purpose, must actively seek out content, in any form, that covers the topics they’re interested in, even if they do not need to cover those topics in their writing. Reading is about exposing yourself to the ideas of others in order to enrich your own thinking — which need not be truly novel to merit writing about. There is an art to revealing ideas through the written word, one that good writers practice primarily with restraint, reserving the majority of their knowledge as an unwritten foundation for what they actually put to words — the tip of the iceberg. Because reading will supply much of the knowledge that makes up the background of your writing, it is indispensable.



It's Content All the Way Down

I began this essay by looking at the staggering volume of content available on the Web and by challenging our sense of its value and purpose. When content is seen purely as a means to an end, as a unit as divorced

from value as our monetary currency so often is, it will tend toward an articulation that is so cheap as to have no hope of achieving even its ill-conceived goals. On the other hand, when content is not focused enough on a concrete goal — even one that is not particularly motivating to a writer, such as advertising — it can just as easily head in the opposite direction, self-indulgently alienated from its purpose and with no future other than online obscurity. It's not that no one reads purposeless content (very few do, though), but that no one takes action after reading it. Eliciting action, whether it be buying a product, service or even just an idea, is a worthy purpose for any piece of content — and one that should shape how it is conceived, produced and promoted.

Promotion, of course, presents plenty of difficulties of its own, far too many to cover adequately here. This entire essay, from the admonition to restore content to its own gold standard to the process by which the purpose of content should align with the purpose of the business, could be reframed to address the content that we create to promote our content. Indeed, our email blasts, comments on forums, message boards and other blogs, as well as our social media engagement, is all, in the end, content. Yet, it has a slightly different purpose. All of these kinds of promotion, insofar as they are done to increase awareness of your content, share that goal of eliciting action. But in this case, the action is not “buying” anything but simply agreeing to offer attention to what you have to say. The job of promotion should be to enable your content to do its job. When the relationship between content and promotional content is reversed — when it's all promotion — ugly things happen. It certainly doesn't take much time for an intelligent person to see when the emperor has no clothes, or for that person to spread the word far and wide. In that regard, it bears consideration that what we say to get attention is very different from what we say once we have it.

This essay is an excerpt of The Strategic Web Designer: How to Confidently Navigate the Web Design Process, by Christopher Butler (HOW Books, 2012). 🐼

Make Your Content Make a Difference

BY COLLEEN JONES 🍷

Content, content, content. It's an obvious part of any interactive experience. In fact, you've probably heard content is king, or queen, or some sort of royalty. Yet, content is elusive. Often, you don't realize your content isn't cutting it until it's too late. Does any of this sound familiar?

- Delayed projects.
- Broken designs.
- Uneven voice.
- Low-performing landing pages.
- Dead social media channels.
- Customer confusion and service calls.

These problems and more are documented extensively (see Halvorson, Kristina. 2009. *Content Strategy for the Web*⁴⁷. New Riders.), so I won't dwell on them. What I *will* dwell on is the solution. But, first, let's discuss the false ones.

Beware Of False Solutions

Just because someone articulates a problem well does *not* mean someone knows the solution. That's when we're susceptible to a false solution. In my many years of experience, I've found these two fake solutions to be very common, very distracting — and very disappointing.

SEO (SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION) SNAKE OIL

Oh, poor JC Penney. This major retailer fell victim to SEO snake oil, such as buying extensive link placements and other “black hat” techniques. And, JC Penney fell hard, with a detailed and brilliant expose of the situation making The New York Times⁴⁸, no less.

⁴⁷. <http://www.contentstrategy.com>

⁴⁸. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/13/business/13search.html?pagewanted=all>

Now, besides avoiding embarrassment, I suggest that you avoid SEO snake oil because it will not bring you results. The spirit of a search engine is to find quality content. A search engine algorithm factors in signs of good content. When someone focuses on tips and tricks to game search engines instead of publishing quality content consistently over time, that person is missing the spirit of SEO. And, sooner or later, that person's results will suffer for it. Google might punish the website or, more likely, the website will get the wrong kind of traffic, or visitors. If you drive lots of visitors to your content instead of *attracting* visitors who are interested in the content topics, you will be disappointed with the results.

And, now, a big caveat: I don't think all SEO is bad. There are legitimate SEO concerns, techniques and advisors. Just remember that SEO tricks are not magic pills for your content ills. If you're spending lots of time and money on SEO but not much on content, you're on the way to disappointment.

Andy Budd recently discussed a closely related point of view in his recent article⁴⁹. He requests to "white hat" practitioners to distance themselves from the world of SEO, stop talking about search engine rankings and start helping clients deliver real value to their users. Therefore we should stop defining ourselves by the discovery medium and focus on the content itself, he rightfully argues.

OVERPROMISED TECHNOLOGY

What else is not a magic pill? A technology product or feature alone. I see this false solution most often with larger companies, who put unrealistic expectations on products and tools such as a content management system (CMS), an analytics tool or a Web application. For example, a prospective client recently vented to me that his organization spent \$100,000 on implementing a new CMS but absolutely *nothing* on planning and creating content worth managing. The result was a one-person Web team destined to fail with its brand new CMS. This short-staffed team was saddled with:

- managing every aspect of a very large website,
- responding to strange or political stakeholder requests for new content and
- dealing with the boss's frustration with the lackluster content.

⁴⁹. http://www.andybudd.com/archives/2011/04/are_seo_practitioners_the_digital_equiva/

Sounds awful, right? Unfortunately, this situation is too common. And it needs to stop.

THE REAL SOLUTION

No SEO trick and no technology product *alone* will solve the content problem for you. The real solution to the content problem is hard work that demands change in your (or your company's) approach to planning, designing and developing interactive experiences. That's what gets results. There's no shortcut. And indeed, the path to content that counts is a hard road. But it cannot be the excuse for compromising the quality of experience we provide to our users.

Get Strategic

Content strategy is planning for every aspect of content to get results. That goes far beyond writing the copy. When getting strategic about content, focus on three key areas: *analysis*, *editorial* and *architecture*. While explaining content strategy in detail literally requires a book (or two or three), I'd like to share with you a concise introduction to each area in this article.



Figure 1: Content strategy usually involves analysis, editorial and architecture.

1. ANALYSIS

Analysis is taking a magnifying glass to your content situation. The better you understand it, the better you can plan exactly what needs to change to reach the results you'd like to have. Two typical activities in the analysis phase are a *content audit* and a *context analysis*. Sometimes, these activities are lumped together into a content analysis. The exact term is not that important as long as you do the analysis thoroughly.

Content Audit

An audit is a close review of your existing content. If you have any content to start with, you need to know *exactly* what it is. The audit tells you what you're working with. By the end of an audit, you'll have answers to questions such as:

- What content types, formats and topics do you have?
- What is the quality of your content? (For help, consult this [content quality checklist](#)⁵⁰.)
- How is your content structured?

- Where do you have obvious content gaps and overlaps, or redundancies?

When you're ready to try a complete content audit yourself, check out the guide [Content Analysis: A Practical Approach](#)⁵¹.

Context Analysis

A context analysis looks at the elements that surround and affect your content. At a minimum, consider and answer these questions about your goal, your users, and your processes.

Goal

- What is your business or organizational goal? Why?
- How will content help you achieve that goal?

Users / Audience

- Who are your users, or the people you want to attract and influence? Why?
- Where (in what channels) are your users looking for content — on websites, on mobile, on social networks?
- If you have an existing website or interactive experience, how is it performing?

Processes / Ecosystem

- How do you create, maintain and govern content now?
- How do you plan to do so when you launch the website or interactive experience?
- What are your competitors doing in the realm of content?

As a simple example, let's look at American Express' [OPEN Forum](#)⁵², a site for small business owners. Why did American Express want to attract and influence these users? Because reaching these users was a step toward their business goal. Mary Ann Fitzmaurice Reilly, SVP of Partnerships & Business Development for American Express OPEN,

⁵⁰. <http://www.uxmatters.com/mt/archives/2009/04/toward-content-quality.php>

⁵¹. <http://www.uxmatters.com/mt/archives/2009/08/content-analysis-a-practical-approach.php>

⁵². <http://www.openforum.com>

notes⁵³, “...our biggest opportunity is with small business growth — if they grow, we grow.” And, American Express decided to help them grow through a unique approach to content. Rather than create more content about their credit cards, American Express decided to create content about small business owner concerns. (More about this approach in the next section, 2. Editorial.)

We could discuss analysis for days, but I’d like to introduce other aspects of content strategy to you as well. For a more detailed explanation of this analysis, I highly recommend the analysis chapter of *Content Strategy for the Web* by Kristina Halvorson. Also, I shared my step-by-step experience in the presentation *Content Analysis: Know Thy Content*⁵⁴.

The real benefit of analysis is *ideas* and *insights* for planning content editorial and architecture. So, let’s take a closer look at those sides of content, using the OPEN Forum as an example along the way.

2. EDITORIAL

Editorial plans mostly for the *people* side of content, such as:

- What style or voice should your content have to attract and resonate with users?
- What topics and themes should your content cover and when?
- Who is responsible for what content?
- What are your standards or criteria for credible content?

Many businesses and organizations who are not media properties completely lack editorial oversight for their websites and other interactive experiences. That can result in problems ranging from errors to missing a competitive advantage. Let’s turn back to our OPEN Forum example. In the world of finance, much content is a combination of dull explanations or legal mumbo jumbo. OPEN Forum takes a different approach.

⁵³. <http://www.fastcompany.com/1669407/charging-up-small-biz-on-social-media>

⁵⁴. <http://www.slideshare.net/leenjones/content-analysis-know-thy-content>

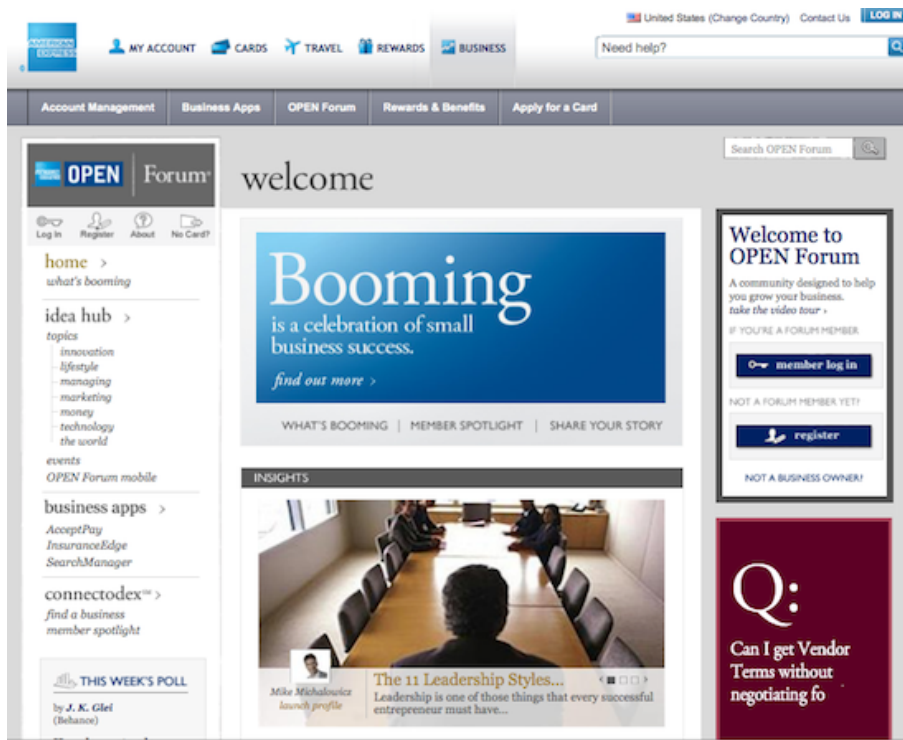


Figure 2: In the stodgy world of finance, American Express OPEN Forum offers a fresh approach to content.

The design might not look dramatically different from other finance sites, but the content is much different. To help small businesses, OPEN Forum regularly offers credible content about topics that *small business owners* care about. American Express produces some content, invited expert columnists create some content, and small business users contribute some content. Even though different authors contribute content, the content is *original* to OPEN Forum. Can you notice how different it is from aggregating random content or simply optimizing pushy landing pages? Through its consistent voice and handy content on OPEN Forum, American Express has positioned itself as a trusted advisor to small businesses. Because the articles, videos, and podcasts are deeply useful to small business users, they're far more valuable to American Express.

Of course, having so many content contributors poses some risk of creating content that feels disjointed. To reduce this risk, what's going on behind the scenes? The right editorial staff and processes ensure the content from different authors is coordinated. For example, while most websites lack an editor, OPEN Forum has an editor-in-chief. And, for robust editorial review and production, American Express partners with Federated Media. As you plan your content processes, you will consider what roles to hire in-house and what roles to hire as freelancers.

Besides the right people and processes, editorial planning results in an important tool: the *Editorial Style Guide*. This guide documents impor-

tant decisions about your content for everyone involved to reference. A style guide typically explains:

- Target audiences / users
- Key messages
- Voice and tone
- Criteria for topics
- Sample content
- Usage, punctuation, and grammar guidelines
- Trademark and legal considerations

For a helpful start, you might want to consider taking a look at [The Yahoo! Style Guide](#)⁵⁵.

So, all of this editorial work sounds interesting, but does it actually get any results? Yes, it does⁵⁶. Since 2007, OPEN Forum has built an audience comparable in size and engagement with other small business media properties. But that's not the best result. In the lucrative small business market, American Express's successful editorial approach is a differentiator. More than that, it's a quiet coup. The results did not happen overnight. They took time. But, compared to its competitors, American Express now *owns* small business online.

I know what you're thinking. "But American Express is a big company. Should a smaller one care about editorial?" Yes. A smaller company or an individual can do it on a smaller scale, with less content, fewer contributors, and probably fewer visitors. Editorial is about attracting the right visitors (or audience) and holding their interest through content. Size does not matter nearly as much as quality.

That's a basic introduction to editorial. But, content concerns don't stop here. Now, let's turn to architecture.

3. ARCHITECTURE

Architecture plans mostly for the *machine* side of content — while keeping the people side in mind. Architecture addresses how your content is organized, structured and repurposed. Architecture gets your content to the right place. This planning might start with a site map but won't end there. You likely will need to define *content models* and *taxonomies* using

⁵⁵. <http://styleguide.yahoo.com/>

⁵⁶. <http://www.fastcompany.com/1669407/charging-up-small-biz-on-social-media>

metadata. In essence, you need to tell your content management system and other platforms what content you have, where to display it and how to display it.

Let's look at a simple example, again from American Express OPEN Forum. The site has clearly defined templates for its articles, videos and other content types. Those content types come together (or aggregate) as meaningful topic pages. Take a look at this one for innovation. That aggregation happens dynamically because of good architecture.



Figure 3: This topic page brings together all of OPEN Forum's original content about a topic (in this case, the topic is innovation), thanks to good architecture.

When you plan architecture well, you gain other benefits. Both search engines and people will find your content more easily. Your content becomes more accessible and flexible, not to mention easier and more efficient to keep consistent.

That's some basic architecture. Now, let's kick it up a notch. Is OPEN Forum part of AmericanExpress.com, the core American Express website? No, it's not. Now, that might bother some user experience designers and information architects out there. Shouldn't this be one cohesive experience? Yes, it should. But, that doesn't necessarily mean all of the content has to be in one website or in one place. AmericanExpress.com serves more visitors than small business owners. So, putting all that

small business content on AmericanExpress.com could easily get in the way of other visitors. Instead, OPEN Forum and AmericanExpress.com link to each other at relevant points.

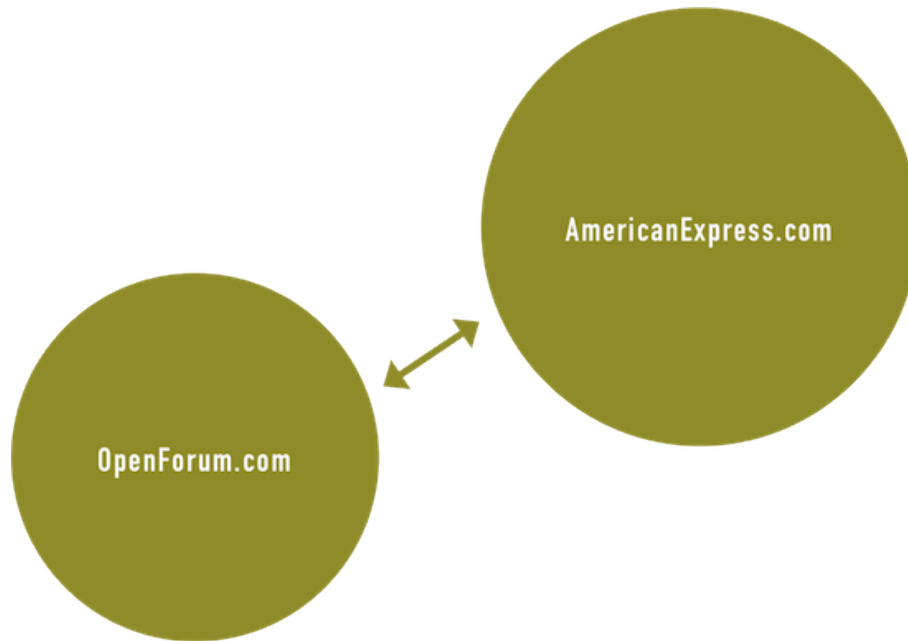


Figure 4: OPEN Forum is not part of the core American Express site.

Okay, now let's kick it up several notches. Content strategy pioneer Rachel Lovinger has articulated convincingly that advanced architecture also makes your content more *nimble* to use across different interactive experiences, from your website to your mobile application. She notes⁵⁷,

"Publishing content that's marked up with smart structure and meta-data allows it to be delivered on a wider range of channels, while still retaining the context and relationships that make it meaningful and useful to both your audience [visitors or users] and your brand. Think of it like providing publishing instructions with the content, where each different platform uses only the instructions that are relevant."

— Jones, Colleen. 2011. Clout: The Art and Science of Influential Content⁵⁸. New Riders.

For example, if your content is structured well, you can offer mobile versions of your content more efficiently, as American Express has. You also will have a much easier time creating widgets or an API to distrib-

⁵⁷. <http://nimble.razorfish.com/publication/?m=11968&l=1>

⁵⁸. <http://content-science.com/clout>

ute your content, as NPR⁵⁹ did. (See image below.) Does this kind of planning get results? Within 12 months after releasing this API, NPR doubled its users (audience). (see: The Future of Content: Mobile Strategies for Government (panel). Government Web Content and New Media Conference 2011.)

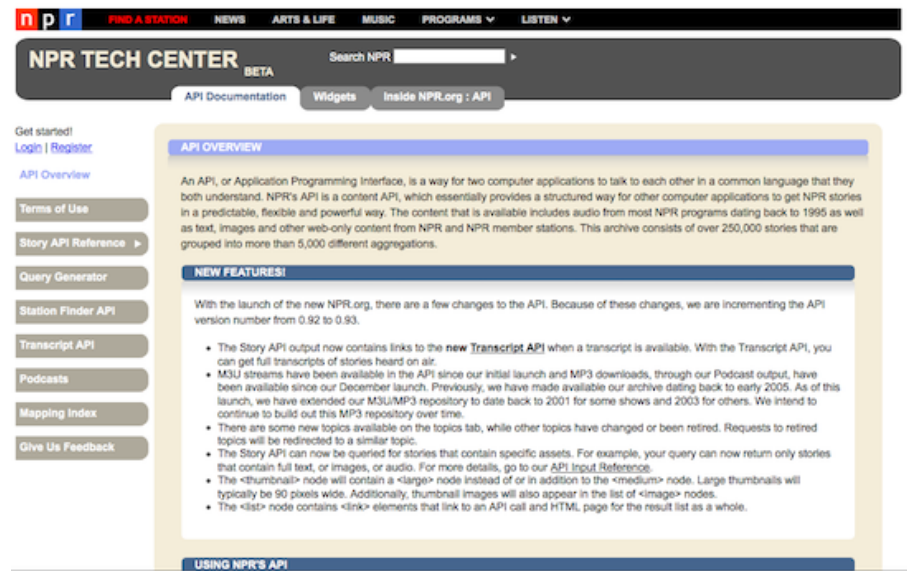


Figure 5: NPR⁶⁰ structured its content well enough to offer a useful API.

You or your organization might think such multichannel architecture issues are mostly technology issues. Now hear this: They're content issues, too. Consider how your content's architecture will help you reach the right users in the right channels.

HOW THESE AREAS WORK TOGETHER

My diagram presents the areas of content strategy as a cycle. Now that you understand each area better, let's look further at this cycle.

Before Launch: Architecture Last

When you're about to reimagine a website or launch a new one, focus on analysis, then editorial, and then architecture. Why architecture last? Because that way you don't waste time and energy planning areas of a site that you don't need. You avoid scrambling to fill unwanted screens and features with content. You'd never build a house by constructing every possible room, then deciding which rooms you actually

59. <http://www.npr.org/api/index>

60. <http://www.npr.org/api/index>

need. It should be no different with websites and interactive experiences. Plan the content you need first, then architect it.

After Launch: Analyze and Adjust

After you launch, the cycle doesn't stop. Analyze how your content performs. Learn how users behave with your content. Stay in touch with industry trends. Watch for problems and opportunities. Address them by adjusting your editorial and architecture. Successful media properties *never* publish content, then leave it. I like how Tracy V. Wilson, Site Director for [HowStuffWorks](http://www.howstuffworks.com)⁶¹, describes her approach to ongoing analysis,

"When we're looking at metrics, we're looking at them in light of how we already know our articles work, how we know that they're structured, how we anticipate that an average reader would come in and go through the article from beginning to end. And we can do the same thing for different types of content. So, we have articles, we have top ten lists, top five lists, quizzes, image galleries ... and we've developed a different sense of what 'normal' is for each of those.

So, we're able to look at when something is deviating from our idea of normal and try to figure out why that deviation would take place. We also use metrics a lot in day-to-day planning, like planning what to feature on our home page ... deciding whether that day's home page was successful; a lot of that is coming from numbers and whether people's behavior on the site that day is matching up with ... what we're thinking of as the typical user behavior." ^[6]⁶²

Get To Work

By now, I hope you appreciate more how analysis, editorial, and architecture work together to make content matter. The next step is to tackle *your* content. But, how? Every situation is a little different. For example, you might feel you have a good start on content analysis and architecture, but you have no idea *how* to approach editorial. These resources will help you get your specific plan together so you can move forward:

- [Content Strategy Deliverables](#)⁶³

This blog post series by content strategy expert Rahel Bailie explains typical content strategy deliverables in handy detail.

^{61.} <http://www.howstuffworks.com>

^{62.} #b6

^{63.} <http://intentionaldesign.ca/category/content-strategies/deliverables/>

- [A Checklist for Content Work](#)⁶⁴

This excerpt from Erin Kissane’s new book on Content Strategy, “The Elements of Content Strategy”, notes some essentials.

- [Content Strategy Meetups](#)⁶⁵

If you want help with content or just some camaraderie, look for a content strategy meetup near you. If not, consider starting one yourself. When I started the meetup in Atlanta, I was happily surprised by the interest from developers, designers and marketers.

- [Content Strategy Forum](#)⁶⁶, September 2011

This conference in London will bring together an international mix of well-known and new voices in content strategy. I’m as excited to see what others contribute as I am to offer a hands-on [workshop](#)⁶⁷.

Also, I recently wrote a book called *Clout: The Art and Science of Influential Web Content*, which explains practical principles for planning content. Along the way, I included examples from startups, government, higher education, large business, and more to inspire useful ideas. I invite you to [learn more about the book](#)⁶⁸.

Really, there’s no reason *not* to take the next step toward better content today. The sooner you move forward, the sooner you’ll overcome those content challenges. And, the sooner you’ll get results. 🐼

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⁶⁸. <http://content-science.com/clout>

⁶⁹. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/13/business/13search.html?pagewanted=all>

⁷⁰. <http://uxmatters.com/mt/archives/2009/04/toward-content-quality.php>

⁷¹. <http://www.fastcompany.com/1669407/charging-up-small-biz-on-social-media>

⁷². <http://nimble.razorfish.com/publication/?m=11968&l=1>

Content Strategy Within The Design Process

BY BRAD SHORR 🍷

The first thing to understand about content strategy is that no two people understand it the same way. It's a relatively new — and extremely broad — discipline with no single definitive definition. A highly informative Knol on content strategy (not available online anymore) defines it as follows:

“Content strategy is an emerging field of practice encompassing every aspect of content, including its design, development, analysis, presentation, measurement, evaluation, production, management, and governance.”

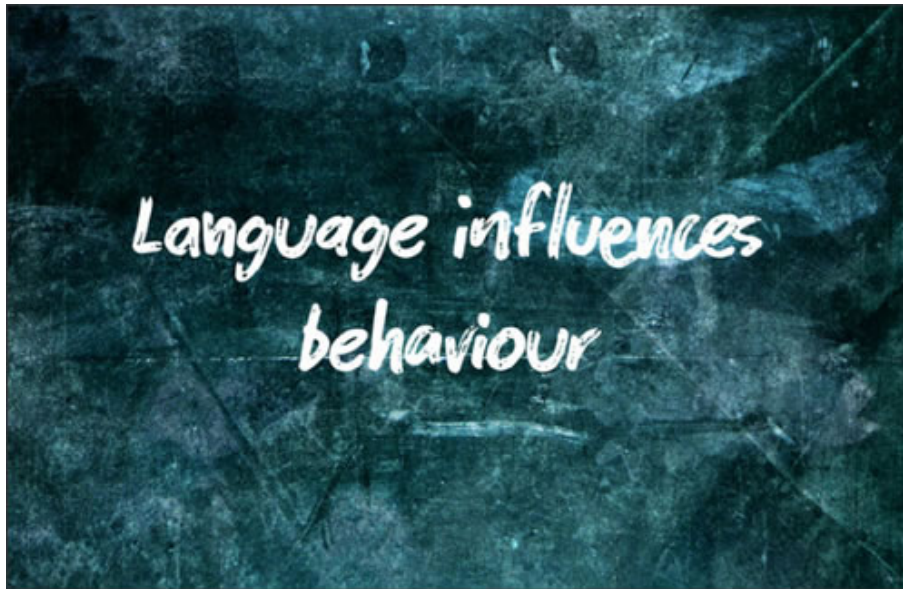
This definition is a great place to start. Although the discipline has clearly evolved, this breakdown of its scope makes perfect sense. The aspects of content strategy that matter most to Web designers in this definition are design (obviously!), development, presentation and production. In this article, we'll concentrate on the relationship between content strategy and design in creating, organizing and displaying Web copy.

As a writer and content strategist myself, I've worked with designers in all of these areas and find the creative process highly enriching. I've been fortunate enough to work with designers who are quick to challenge ideas that are unclear or unsound, who are brilliant at creating striking visual representations of even the most complex concepts. A lively interplay between design and content is not only fun, but is how spectacular results are achieved. This is why content strategy should matter a great deal to designers.

WHAT IS CONTENT STRATEGY, AND WHY SHOULD A DESIGNER CARE?

Content strategy is the glue that holds a project together. When content strategy is ambiguous or absent, don't be surprised if you end up with the Internet equivalent of Ishtar⁷³. When content strategy is in place and in its proper place, we're on our way to producing beautiful and effective results.

⁷³. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ishtar_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ishtar_(film))



Slide from *The Language of Interfaces*⁷⁴ by Des Traynor.

While wrapping one's head around content strategy might be difficult, the thing that makes it work is very simple: good communication. Sometimes a project moves along like a sports car on a superhighway. Other times, the road is so full of bumps and potholes that it's a wonder we ever reach our destination. As we explore the relationship between content strategy and design, I'll detail how I keep the channels of communication open and go over the workflow processes that I've used to support that effort. I hope that sharing my experiences (both positive and negative) will help you contribute to and manage projects more effectively and deliver better products to clients.

How To Get Started: The First Step Is The Longest

Project manager: We need a landing page for client X.

Designer: I can't start the design until I see some content.

Writer: I can't start writing until I see a design.

You may find this dialogue amusing... until it happens to you! At our firm, we find that the best way to get past such a standoff is to write first. This is because content strategy, at a fundamental level, frames a project for the designer. As a content strategist, my job is to articulate the why, where, who, what and how of the content:

- *Why* is it important to convey this message? This speaks to purpose.

⁷⁴. <http://speakerdeck.com/u/destraynor/p/the-language-of-interfaces>

- *Where* on the website should the message appear? This speaks to context.
- *Who* is the audience? This speaks to the precision of the message.
- *What* are we trying to say? This speaks to clarity.
- *How* do we convey and sequence the information for maximum impact? This speaks to persuasiveness.

Bringing it down to a more detailed level, let's consider a landing page. A content strategist will determine such things as the following:

- **Audience**
Is the audience sophisticated? Down to earth? College-level? Predominately male? Female? Etc.
- **Word count**
Some pitches scream for long copy, while others must be stripped to the bare minimum. SEO might factor into the equation as well.
- **Messaging priorities**
What is the most important point to convey? The least important? What needs to be said first (the hook)? What needs to be said just leading up to the call to action?
- **Call to action**
What will the precise wording be? What emotional and intellectual factors will motivate the visitor to click through?

Clear direction on these points not only helps the writer write, but helps the designer with layout, color palettes and image selection. When we start with words, we produce designs that are more reflective of the product's purpose.

Landing pages are a great place to try this workflow, because in terms of content strategy, they are less complex than many other types of Web pages. A product category page, on the other hand, might have a less obvious purpose or multiple purposes, considerably greater word counts, more (and more involved) messaging points, and a variety of SEO considerations, all of which would affect its design.

QUICK TIPS FOR GETTING STARTED

- Make sure someone is specifically responsible for content strategy. If strategic responsibility is vague, your final product will be, too.

- Slow down! Everybody, me included, is eager to dive headfirst into a new project. But “ready-aim-fire” is not a winning content strategy. Make sure everyone is on the same page conceptually before cranking out work.
- If content strategy falls on your shoulders as a designer, cultivate an understanding of the discipline. Resources are listed at the end of this article to help you.
- Make sure designers and writers understand what their roles are — and are not. There’s no need for writers to tell designers how to design, or for designers to tell writers how to write.

Perfecting The Process: Break Up Those Bottlenecks

Project manager: How are things coming along?

Developer: I’m waiting on design.

Designer: I’m waiting on content.

Writer: I’m waiting on project management.

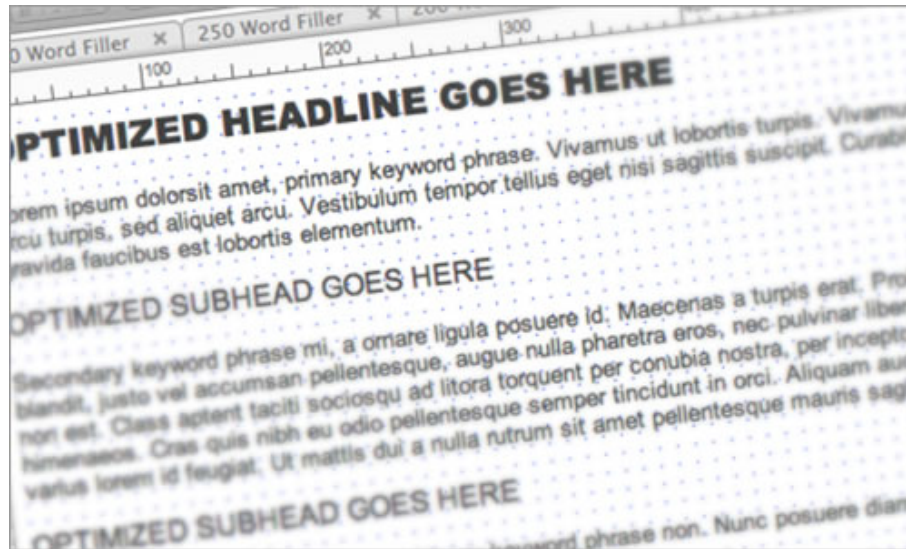
Web development projects in particular involve a lot of moving parts, with potential bottlenecks everywhere. The graphic below describes our Web development process, with an emphasis on the design and content components. Chances are, whether you are freelancing or at an agency, at least parts of this should look familiar:



Link: [Larger version](#)⁷⁵ (Image credit: Chris Depa, Straight North)

The process is by no means perfect, but it is continually improving. In the next section, we'll look at the many types of content-design difficulties you might experience.

To help our designers lay out text for wireframes and designs, we utilize content templates based on various word counts. These templates also incorporate best practices for typography and SEO. When the designer drops the template into a wireframe, it looks like this:



SEO content template in a wireframe.

The use of content templates not only takes a lot of guesswork out of the designer's job, but also speeds up client reviews. When clients are able to see what the content will roughly look like in the allotted space, they tend to be more comfortable with the word counts and the placement of text on the page.

Communication can be streamlined using project management software. We use Basecamp, which is a popular system, but many other good ones are available. If you're a freelancer, getting clients to work on your preferred project management platform can be an uphill battle, to say the least. Still, I encourage you to try; my experience in managing projects via email has been dismal, and many freelance designers I know express the same frustration.

The big advantage of a project management system is that it provides a single place for team members to manage tasks and interact. Internal reviews of design templates is one good example. The project manager can collect feedback from everyone in one place, and each participant can see what others have said and respond to it. Consolidating

75. <http://media.smashingmagazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/SMgraphic-large.jpg>

this information prevents the gaps and miscommunication that can occur when projects are managed through multiple email exchanges. Designers can see all of the feedback in one place — and only one place. This is a big time-saver.

QUICK TIPS FOR THE CREATIVE PROCESS

- Make sure someone is specifically responsible for project management.
- Whether or not your process is sophisticated, get it down in writing and in front of all team members before the project starts. This really helps to align expectations and keep communication flowing.
- Meet at regular intervals to discuss status and problems. Hold yourself and others accountable.
- Get approvals along the way, rather than dump the completed project in the client's lap. Having clients sign off on a few pages of content and one or two templates really helps to align the creative process with client expectations, and it reduces the risk of those massive overhauls at the tail end that demolish budgets and blow deadlines.
- Writers and designers should discuss issues as quickly, openly and thoroughly as possible.

Conflict Resolution: Why Can't We All Just Get Along?

Designer: All these words are boring me.

Writer: All these images are confusing me.

Project manager: All these arguments are killing me.

No matter how clear the strategy, no matter how smooth the process, design and content will conflict somewhere along the line in almost every project. In fact, if creative tension is absent, it may well indicate that the project is in serious trouble. Here are the issues I run into on a fairly regular basis, as well as ideas for getting past them.

MAKING ROOM FOR SEO CONTENT

Big chunks of content are bothersome to designers; even as a writer, I worry about high word counts turning off some of our audience. However, when SEO considerations demand a lot of words on a page, there are ways to make everyone happy:

1. **Tabs are a nifty way to hide text.**

Tabs allow you to keep the page tight vertically. Even more importantly, they enable visitors to easily find the information they need — and ignore what they don't need. Below is a tabbed product area in the Apple Store.

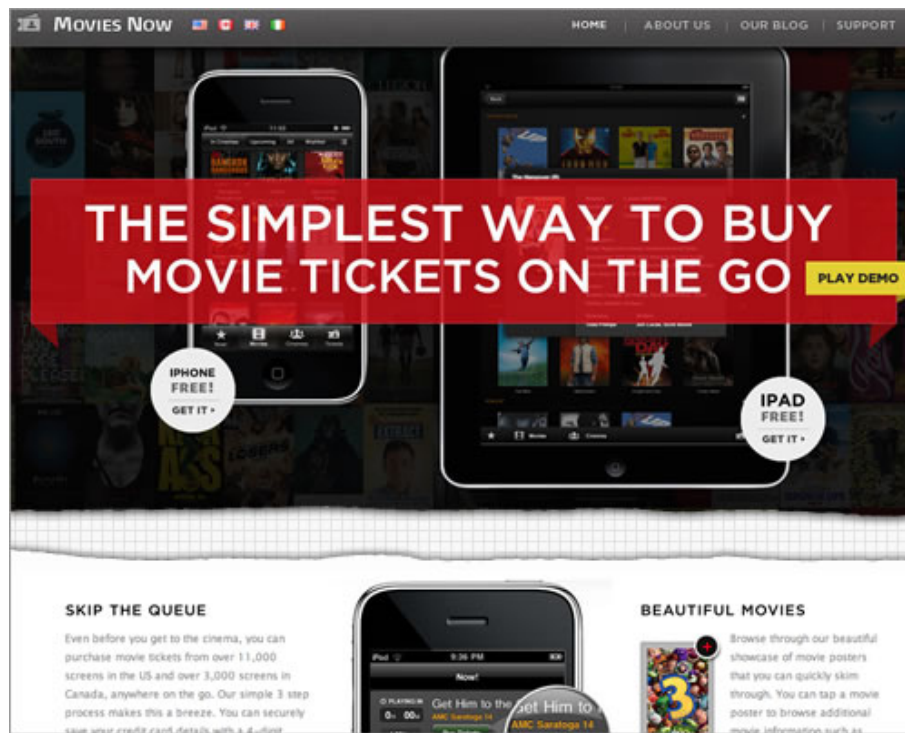


*The Apple Store*⁷⁶

2. **Keep SEO content below the fold.**

This is a compromise, because an SEO strategist would prefer optimized content to appear above the fold. However, if a website is to have any hope of *converting* traffic brought in by SEO, then visitors need to see appealing design, not a 300-word block of text.

⁷⁶. http://store.apple.com/us/browse/home/shop_mac

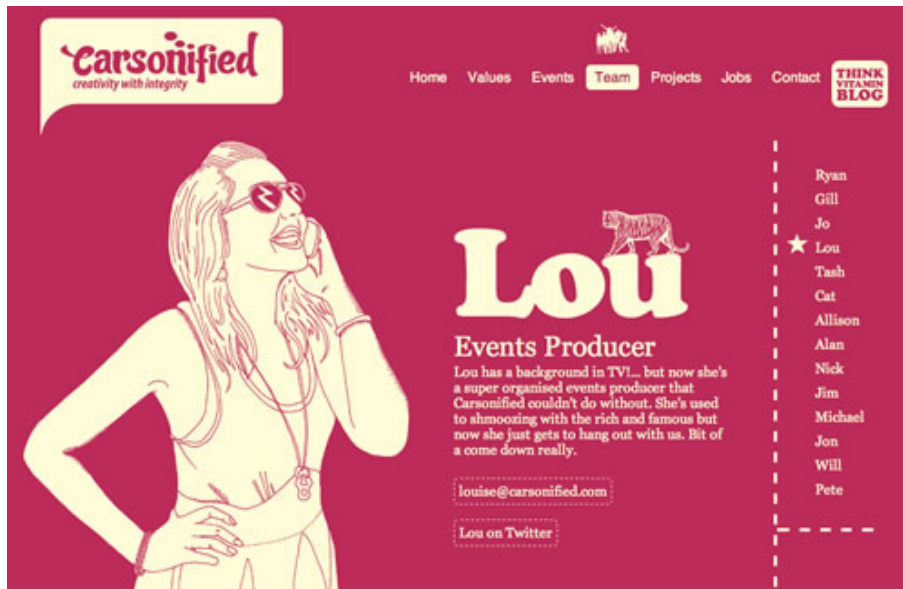


The Movies Now⁷⁷ landing page. (Not available anymore.)

3. Step up creativity on non-SEO pages.

For many websites, the pages that are most important to SEO have to do with products and services, where conveying features and benefits is needed more than wowing visitors with design. Conversely, pages on which awesome design matters most are often unimportant for SEO: “About,” bio and customer service pages, for example.

⁷⁷. <http://moviesnowapp.com/>



Carsonified's team pages⁷⁸.

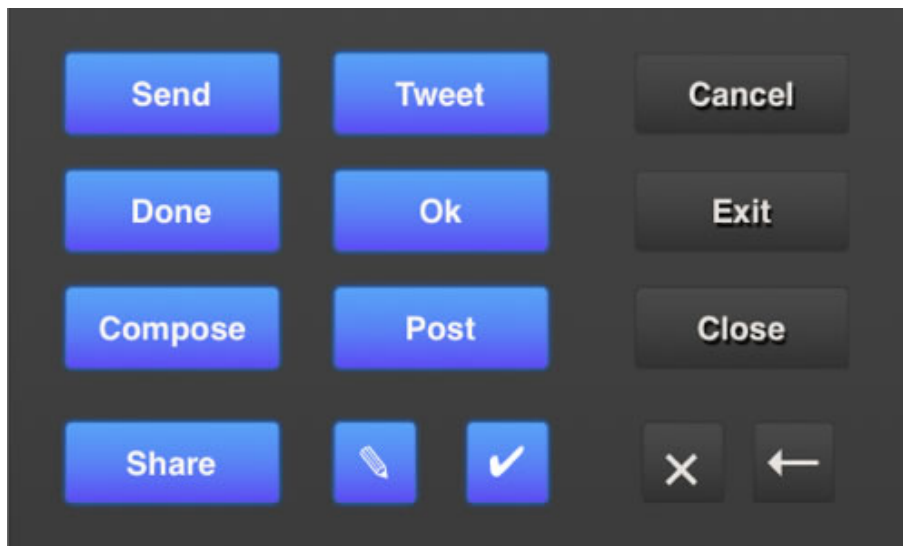
CLARITY VS. CREATIVITY

We fight this battle over what I call “design content” all the time — primarily with navigation labels, home-page headers and call-to-action blocks. At a fundamental level, it is a battle over the question, “Which wins over the hearts and minds of visitors more: awesome design or straightforward information?”

Navigation

Making the labels for navigation straightforward is a fairly established best practice. Predictability is important: if visitors are looking for your “About” page, and they finally stumble on it by clicking on “Be Amazed,” then the emotion you will have elicited is irritation, not adoration. Be as creative as you want with the look and feel of the labels, but to maximize the user experience, the text and positioning of the labels must be as vanilla as possible.

⁷⁸. <http://carsonified.com/team/lou/>



For insight on how to achieve clarity, read “[The Language of Interfaces](http://contrast.ie/blog/the-language-of-interfaces/)⁷⁹.”

Design of the header on the home page

Rotating header images and other types of animation are rather in vogue these days, and they’re a good way to convey a thumbnail sketch of a firm’s capabilities and value proposition. Content must convey information, but the header must work on an emotional level to be effective. Writers must take a back seat to designers! The Ben the Bodyguard home page (below) starts to build a connection using a comic character and storyline. This is different than most sites that simply talk about feature after feature.



The design should tell a story. (*Ben the Bodyguard*⁸⁰)

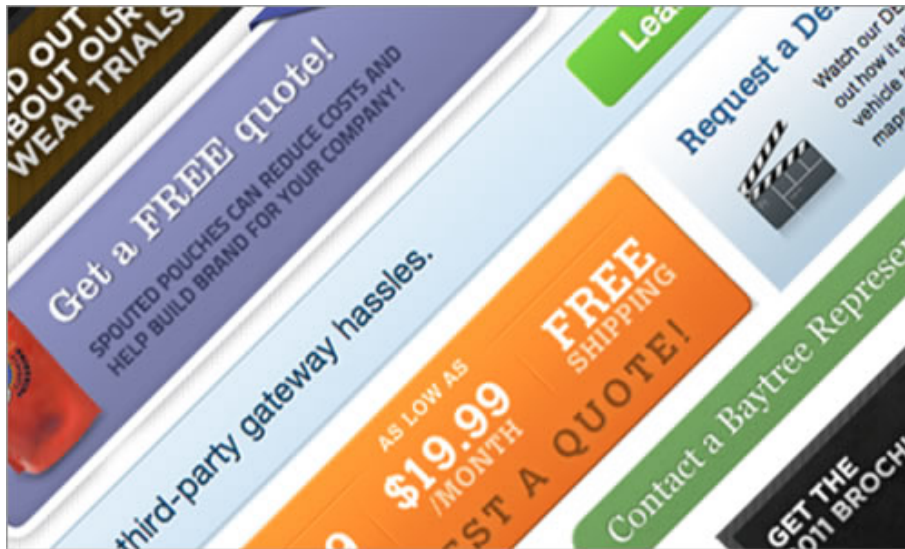
⁷⁹. <http://contrast.ie/blog/the-language-of-interfaces/>

Call-to-action blocks

Before all else, make sure your website's pages even *have* calls to action, because this is your opportunity to lead visitors to the logical next step. A call to action could be as simple as a text link, such as “Learn more about our Chicago SEO services⁸¹.” Generally more effective for conversion would be a design element that functions almost as a miniature landing page.

Much like landing pages, the wording of the call-to-action phrase must be crystal clear and be completely relevant to the page to which you are taking visitors. Yet impeccable wording is not enough: the design of the content block must be captivating, and the text laid out in a way that makes it eminently readable.

Designers can get rather snarly when I tell them their design for a call to action needs five more words: it might force them to rethink the entire design. Many times, though, a discussion with the designer will make us realize that we don't actually need those extra five words; in fact, we'll sometimes hit on a way to *reduce* the word count. The creative interplay mentioned earlier makes a huge difference in this all-important area of conversion optimization.



Calls to action require excellent design and content.

QUICK TIPS FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION

1. Keep the lines of communication open between all team members and the client.

⁸⁰. <http://benthebodyguard.com/index2.php>

⁸¹. <http://www.example.com/>

2. Select a project manager with great communication skills and an objective point of view.
3. Stay focused on the purpose of the design: is it to persuade, motivate, inform or something else? Creative disagreements should never be theoretical; they should always be grounded in what will increase the real-world effectiveness of the work at hand.

Long-Winded Writers Vs. Lofty-Minded Designers

One thing I run up against continually is my own tendency to say too much and a designer's tendency to say too little. Ask a writer what time it is, and they'll tell you how to make a clock. Ask a designer what time it is, and they'll give you a stylized image of a pendulum. Neither answer is particularly helpful!

These opposing mentalities pose challenges in Web design. Does an image alone convey enough information about a product's key benefit? Will the length of a 200-word explanation of that benefit deter people from reading it? How intuitive can we expect visitors to be? How patient?

This is when having a process that encourages communication between team members makes a difference. I wish I had a secret formula for resolving conflict, but I don't. I know of only two ways to balance design and content philosophies, and one of them is to talk it out as a team. As I said, communication is at the heart of an effective content strategy, and we have to resist the temptation that some of us have to withdraw into a shell when we encounter confrontation.

The other way to resolve conflicts — astoundingly underused, in my experience — is to get feedback from target users. Simply showing people a Web page and then asking for their key takeaways will tell you just about all you need to know about how effective you've been in getting the point across. Our opinion of our own work will always be subjective. Furthermore, because we're emotionally invested in what we've created, discussing its flaws calmly and collectedly is difficult. Users are the ultimate judge of any creative effort, so why not take subjectivity and emotion out of the equation by going directly to the source? 🐼

Resources

- *The New Rules of Marketing and PR*⁸², David Meerman Scott
Explains content strategy better than anything I've read. The third edition was published in July 2011.

- “[Call to Action Buttons: Examples and Best Practices⁸³](#),” Jacob Gube
To promote creative compatibility, designers and writers alike should study this Smashing Magazine article.
- “[Top Ten Mistakes of Web Management⁸⁴](#),” Jakob Nielsen
For insight into design-related project management, read this post by the brilliant Web usability expert Jakob Nielsen.

82. http://www.amazon.com/New-Rules-Marketing-Applications-ebook/dp/B005FMLIo4/ref=sr_1_3?ie=UTF8&qid=1317047236&sr=8-3

83. <http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2009/10/13/call-to-action-buttons-examples-and-best-practices/>

84. <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/9706b.html>

Content Strategy: Optimizing Your Efforts For Success

BY ALLIE GRAY FREELAND 🐼

Content strategy is a beast with many heads, names and trajectories. To approach it is to be sucked in full force. Even so, as crucial as content strategy is, conveying its gravity to a big audience, or to key administrators, is often hard. Being so inherently complex, it's often easiest to tackle by example.

My first job as a Web content writer involved creating a campaign that promoted holiday spending and travel. I came up with clever tag lines that incorporated lyrics from Bing Crosby Christmas jingles. I thought I was doing great work, and when I got an email from my boss to discuss the campaign, I assumed I would get a pat on the back.



*Approaches to Content Strategy*⁸⁵ by Richard Ingram.

⁸⁵. http://www.richardingram.co.uk/downloads/content_strategy_app_2038.png

When I got to my boss's office, she pulled up a page I had recently written and asked me what action I thought the content was encouraging. At first I was offended. But as I sat there, I began sweating and couldn't come up with a clear answer (beyond that I was promoting holiday cheer).

My boss then said something that has stuck with me and guided much of my work as a content specialist. She said that while my creativity may be admirable, it wasn't strategic.

Indeed, as I had not yet learned, when a consumer is on the Web, they are in a different mode than someone who is scanning a magazine or leafing through the mail. If there's one boiled-down, oversimplified thing you need to grasp about content strategy, it is this: know your audience. Know who they are, where they are, what they know, what they want to know, and how they look for what they want to know. Most of the time — although there are exceptions to every rule, of course — your audience will appreciate fresh copy that gets to the point and features guidable keywords.

Of course, content strategy includes a lot: everything from content analysis to content channel management ("presence") to SEO optimization. But if I had to break it down for a newcomer, here is the advice I would offer.

KNOW THE PURPOSE OF YOUR CONTENT

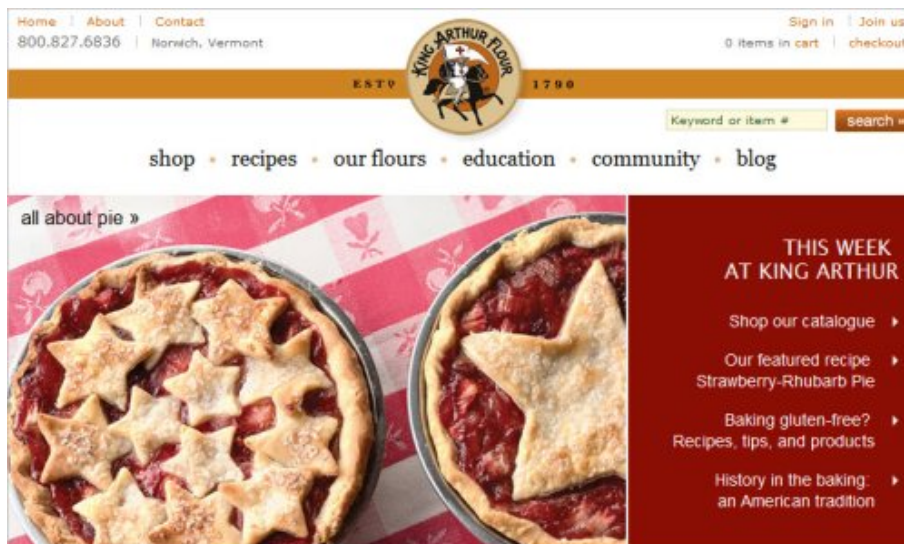
First off, you have to meet with your colleagues and draft a statement of intent for your content. Seriously, write it down, stick it above your computer, and come back to it often.

What are you trying to create? How will this content promote your business goals and help satisfy your customers' needs? Pushing out content won't do you any good if you're not sure of its purpose. For some examples of Web platforms in the retail industry with clear, purposeful content, I direct you to King Arthur Flour⁸⁶, Newman's Own⁸⁷ and Tom's of Maine⁸⁸. The sites do not look beautiful, but they serve their purpose.

⁸⁶. <http://www.kingarthurfLOUR.com/>

⁸⁷. <http://www.newmansown.com/>

⁸⁸. <http://www.tomsomaine.com/>



King Arthur Flour⁸⁹ is a nice example of websites in the retail industry with clear, purposeful content.

KNOW YOUR KEY MESSAGES

Once you have a purpose, you need key messages that convey that purpose to a broad audience. Pin down those key messages by collaborating with your staff. And again: write them down, stick them above your computer, and come back to them often. Incorporate them into your content creatively and as often as possible.

My first Web content job was writing for a city's tourism bureau, and I kept the city's top 10 tourism draws taped to my computer screen (in front of my eyes) at all times. At first, it seemed like my writing was repetitive, but I began to realize that those key messages were helping me nail the company's mission right on the nose, every time I typed.

Believe me, if you do it with style, you won't sound like a broken record. Rather, you will be clarifying why the business is important and demonstrating to your audience why you matter.

KNOW WHAT YOUR AUDIENCE WANTS NEXT

This is perhaps one of the hardest but also one of the most important aspects of content strategy. After you're done with the nuts and bolts of the content — be it for the Web or email or whatever else — you need to anticipate what kind of content your audience will want more of.

What questions will someone have after seeing your work? What new developments will affect your business or change your offerings and messages? Answering these questions requires keeping on top of

⁸⁹. <http://www.kingarthurfLOUR.com/>

news and Web trends and maintaining an active, responsive relationship with your audience. Set up a feedback section of your website, if you don't have one. Keep up with fans on Facebook and Twitter and through a blog, because one of the easiest ways to anticipate your users' needs is by asking them what they want.

Some examples of companies with good cross-platform content and audience interaction are Southwest, Zappos and American Express. Best advice? Study what they do, and then do it better.

KNOW THAT EVERYTHING NEEDS A PLAN

You need an editorial plan, an SEO plan, a content management plan, a content channel plan and a content distribution plan, among other plans. These plans should all be in conversation with each other. Create Excel sheets that highlight your plans. Have meetings to discuss the plans. Assemble teams for the different plans, and appoint people to lead those teams. And so on.

Every member of your organization should know that these plans exist. And if they don't know them intimately, they should at least have easy access to them. One of the easiest ways for something to go wrong, content-wise, be it poor SEO or poor spelling, is to write content willy-nilly, without a clear, plotted trajectory. As they say, Rome wasn't built in a day, and neither is great content.

KNOW THAT YOU NEED A GREAT WRITER

Because I'm a writer by trade, I want to emphasize the importance of hiring really amazing Web writers. The people who succeed at Web writing are so much more than creators of snappy headlines and bullet points. Beyond being able to write artful sentences, good content writers are champions of analysis and synthesis.

Additionally, a lot of technological know-how goes into the job. Writers need to understand user experience, Web design and information architecture, and they often need to keep track of a staggering amount of content catalogues.

If you think you can hire any old Joe to crank out amazing, engaging content, think again. In hiring a Web team, finding a great content writer will most likely be your hardest task.

ONE LAST THING

To succeed in Web content strategy, you also need to know what not to do. Perhaps the most common mistake is overly long content. You want

readers to always be engaged — and not to click away from your website — so get to your point, and get to it fast.

By the same token, the content shouldn't be too short either. To maximize your SEO, visibility and more, and to ensure the audience is engaged and entertained, you have to give 'em some meat. Make them admire your concision, but also give them enough to chew on.

Another faux pas that is big but easy to fix is neglecting to update the content every now and again. As they say, keep it fresh!

This is only the tip of the iceberg. If you're interested in learning more about content strategy, I recommend the [Scatter/Gather⁹⁰](http://scattergather.razorfish.com/) blog by Razorfish, a great resource for anyone new to or interested in the field, as well as the recent article "[Make Your Content Make a Difference⁹¹](http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2011/04/12/make-your-content-make-a-difference/)," by Web content wizard Colleen Jones.

Thanks, and good luck contenting! 🐼

⁹⁰. <http://scattergather.razorfish.com/>

⁹¹. <http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2011/04/12/make-your-content-make-a-difference/>

Finding Your Tone Of Voice

BY ROBERT MILLS 🐼

When creating content for the Web, considering tone of voice is important. Your tone can help you stand out from competitors, communicate efficiently and effectively with your audience and share your personality.

What Is Tone Of Voice, And Why Is It Important?

Tone of voice isn't what we say but how we say it. It's the language we use, the way we construct sentences, the sound of our words and the personality we communicate. It is to writing what logo, color and typeface are to branding.

When we speak to others in person, our non-verbal communication says more than the words themselves. Non-verbal communication consists of facial expressions, tone, cues, gestures and pitch. Online, we lose all of these except tone. We can imbue our Web copy with a tone that is distinct, clear, consistent and relevant to the target audience.

You can't create a strong and effective user experience without language. And tone of voice plays a big role in this by doing the following:

- Differentiating you from competitors,
- Showing your personality,
- Helping you gain and retain customers.

Here are some snippets of content from the “About” pages of well-known brands. You can see how each has its own unique and appropriate tone of voice.

STARBUCKS

“To say that Starbucks⁹² purchases and roasts high-quality whole bean coffee is very true. That's the essence of what we do — but it hardly tells the whole story.

Our coffeehouses have become a beacon for coffee lovers everywhere. Why do they insist on Starbucks? Because they know they can

⁹². <http://www.starbucks.com/>

count on genuine service, an inviting atmosphere and a superb cup of expertly roasted and richly brewed coffee every time.”

AMERICAN EXPRESS

“Each day, American Express⁹³ makes it easier, safer and more rewarding for consumers and businesses to purchase the things they need and for merchants to sell their goods and services. An engine of commerce, American Express provides innovative payment, travel and expense management solutions for individuals and businesses of all sizes.”

BRITISH AIRWAYS

“British Airways⁹⁴ is a full service global airline, offering year-round low fares with an extensive global route network flying to and from centrally-located airports.”

DISNEY

“The Walt Disney Company⁹⁵, together with its subsidiaries and affiliates, is a leading diversified international family entertainment and media enterprise with five business segments: media networks, parks and resorts, studio entertainment, consumer products and interactive media.”

Each of these organizations has its own voice. The formality of Disney’s voice might be surprising, but despite the fact that it sells “fun,” Disney is still a massive corporation. You need a voice that is true to your company’s culture and values. As Aarron Walter⁹⁶ says in his book Designing for Emotion⁹⁷, “To engage your audience emotionally, you must let your brand’s personality show.”

How To Find The Right Tone

You need to have a lot in place before getting started, and the process needs to be embedded in the project. It’s more than about just cobbling together a few sentences. Tone of voice requires careful decisions based on the company’s values and personality.

⁹³. <https://www.americanexpress.com/>

⁹⁴. <http://www.britishairways.com/>

⁹⁵. <http://thewaltdisneycompany.com/>

⁹⁶. <http://aarronwalter.com/>

⁹⁷. <http://www.abookapart.com/products/designing-for-emotion>

You might need to adjust your process to find the right tone because each project has its own constraints and deliverables. But research is key, and it could include the following:

- Interviews with stakeholders,
- Content audits,
- Brand reviews,
- Audience research.

Interviews With Stakeholders

The key stakeholders are usually the decision-makers, so engaging them and getting them involved is essential. Your interviews with them needn't be restricted to tone of voice, but they should include it.

Give them enough time to say everything they need to say, but keep the discussion focused on three or four major topics. You might want to ask what they think how the company sounds like to others and how they want it to sound. It is also chance to find out which voices among competitors and other organizations they like or dislike. Asking how they view their position in the marketplace would be valuable, too.

Don't let them focus on what they think the solution should be, though. They need to tell you their problems; solving them is your job. The stakeholders should be concerned with their culture, business objectives and reasons for initiating this project. You could also send them your list of questions or an agenda before the interview so that they are not caught off guard.

Keeping the interviews informal would also help. The more comfortable the stakeholders feel with you, the more honest they will be.

Content Audits

A content audit can be a project in itself, depending on how much content you are dealing with. By reviewing all of your current content, you can see what the tone of voice is and then ask later in the research phase whether it is relevant. Reviewing the content relative to the tone should be done carefully, though. If new content is being written, then the people responsible will need guidance on what tone to adopt.

This is also an opportunity to assess whether the tone is consistent across all of the content. Perhaps your social media channels and corporate brochure vary in tone, but do they still sound like your company?



The voice should be essentially the same, regardless of the platform. [Image source](#)⁹⁸.

Research

Tone of voice is one part of a brand, so it needs to be considered as part of the big picture. The tone needs to fit the visual identity of the company, too. A formal, corporate-looking brand identity paired with a casual and chatty voice wouldn't be coherent. Reviewing the brand, including typefaces, colors, language and imagery, will help you determine the most appropriate and authentic tone.

STAKEHOLDER AND CLIENT RESEARCH

Who will be “listening” to you? Getting input from stakeholders is helpful, but these people usually aren't the target audience. Any research you invest in the audience will be time well spent, even if it confirms what you already knew. Only when you know the audience will you be able to tell whether the tone of voice is appropriate.

This is all about asking questions. Gather information, and then draw insights from it to find out what works and what has to change.

If you are part of a team, then take time away from email and the phone to have a dedicated session about tone of voice. As a team, ask these questions:

- What is our personality?
- How do we sound to others?
- How do we want to sound?

⁹⁸. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/53941041@N00/5540462170/>

- Are we authentic?
- Who are we targeting?
- How can we keep our voice but change the tone?

The team could also create mood boards related to how it views the company. These could reveal whether these insiders all view the company in the same way.

Getting everyone on board is important because if the team understands the tone of the company, then it will be able to communicate it consistently. In large organizations, certain stakeholders will likely need to be involved in this process, with the guidelines communicated to everyone else.

You might have to face some hard truths about who you are during this phase. Perhaps you want to be very informal but your industry doesn't allow it. The key is to be honest. All of the information you gather from the questions above will start to paint a detailed picture of who you are.

You can then narrow down to more specific questions:

- Should we use jargon?
- Can we use humor?
- How informal can we be?
- What punctuation should we use?
- What do our competitors sound like?

One final question not to be ignored is, "Who are we engaging with?"

AUDIENCE RESEARCH

Your tone of voice has to communicate who you are to the target audience. But what if you have different audiences?

Your tone has to suit the brand, no matter who you are talking to, and this in turn will result in a good user experience. When addressing investors, you might find yourself sounding corporate and business-like. If a segment of your audience is younger, you might change your tone to suit it. Don't. This immediately prevents you from being consistent, which means you aren't being authentic, which is critical.

The change will happen at the level of content. The tone will stay the same, while the content will be adapted and refined as needed. Your message might be serious, but that doesn't mean you can't say it in a friendly way.

If you are a company that builds things, you could say this:

“The diversity in our department enables us to be innovative and creative, resulting in revolutionary, ground-breaking and immersive experiences for our target customers.”

Or you could say this:

“We build awesome products that our customers love.”

Going through these processes will have yielded a lot of data and information. The challenge now is to decide what’s right. This will be complicated by diverging opinions, and you will need buy-in from the stakeholders.

With a full understanding of the company’s challenges, personality, brand and target audience(s), you’re in a strong position to determine what the tone of voice should be. Any decisions you now make will be backed up by data.

Don’t be afraid to challenge the decision-makers either. They hired you for your expertise after all. Showing examples of their current tone and the proposed new tone will help. Stakeholders often think they sound a certain way when in fact their tone is very different. They might have trouble admitting this, but they can’t argue with cold hard data, and all of the time you’ve spent on research and auditing will support your decisions.

Once the tone has been decided, write down guidelines. The tone of voice might be a part of broader branding guidelines. If not, then put something together that informs everyone in the organization what you should sound like.

Showing examples is best. Include before-and-afters, and even list words to use and words to avoid if needed. If everyone on the team understands the tone, then they will help to keep it consistent, especially if you have more than one content creator.

Different Tones

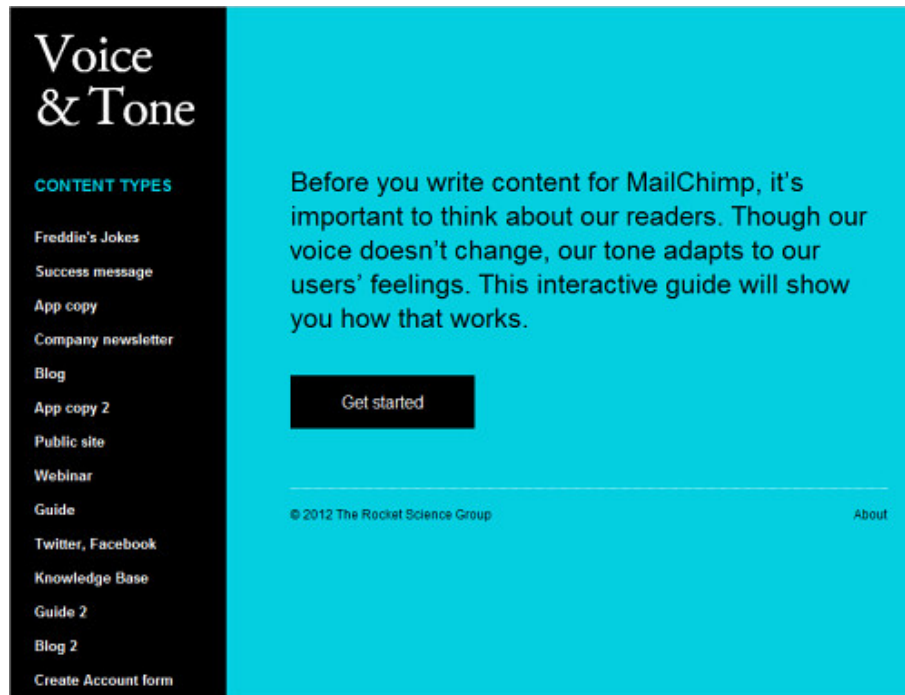
MailChimp⁹⁹ has taken its guidelines a step further by putting them online for all to see, on a website named Voice and Tone¹⁰⁰. The website makes clear through examples, tips and descriptions of feelings exactly how to achieve MailChimp’s tone of voice in all areas, including apps, social media, the main website, the blog and internal communications.

⁹⁹. <http://mailchimp.com/>

¹⁰⁰. <http://voiceandtone.com/>

The same approach and presentation could be used for printed guidelines, too. Tell team members how to get the tone right, but also show them.

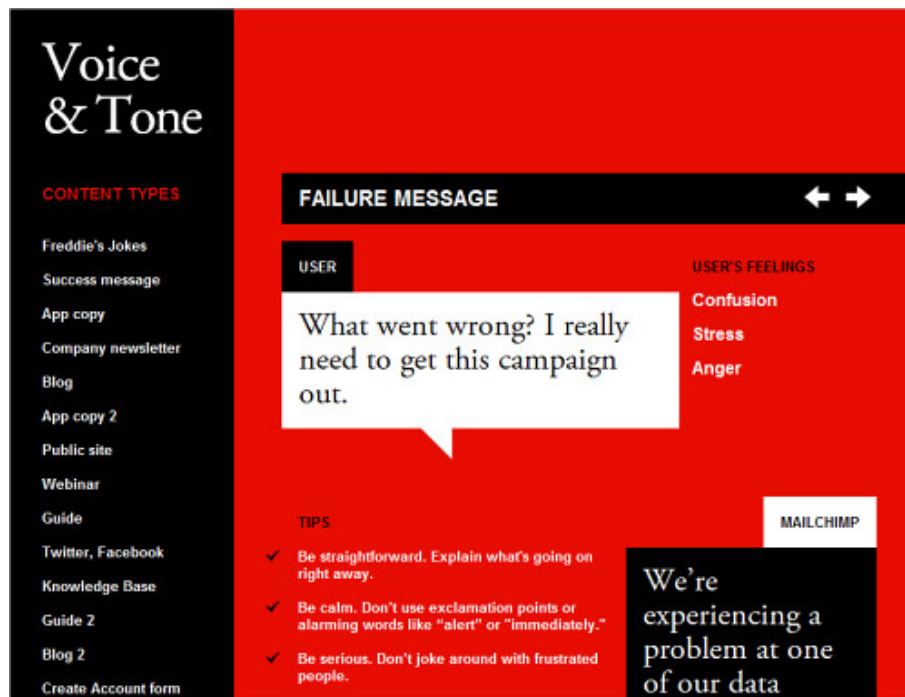
Here are some pages from “Voice and Tone”:



Content types on MailChimp's “Voice and Tone”.



*Voice and Tone*¹⁰¹ explains the jokes of MailChimp's mascot, Freddie.



An explanation of how to write failure messages.

If the project allows you to have fun with the design and language, then you can get quirky or adopt a tone that others in the marketplace would shy away from. There's a fine line between coming across as fun and quirky and coming across as unprofessional or snarky.

If you are in the legal, government or banking industry, then going the informal chatty route might not be appropriate, because you will need to appear trustworthy and professional to customers. Would you bank with a company that sounded like it wanted to have fun all day? I wouldn't. I work hard for my money and want it to be looked after.

Your tone can still be friendly. The key is to be credible, because the worst thing you could do is try to sound like someone else or be something you are not.

I was at a local arts and literature festival recently, and one of the slides that was shown before each talk said this:

101. <http://voiceandtone.com/freddies-jokes>



PLEASE TURN YOUR
MOBILES BACK ON
AT THE END OF THE SESSION
AND TELL YOUR FRIENDS
ABOUT HOW FAB IT WAS

The tone of voice here was true to the spirit of the festival, making it authentic, and it was noticeable in other signage, making it consistent. It suited the personality of the festival and appealed to the audience that attended. The tone wasn't negative ("Please turn your phone off"), which is the approach most commonly taken by cinemas, theaters and airlines. Instead, you were asked turn your phone back on after the talk, on the assumption that you had already turned it off. The bonus of asking you to share news of the session encouraged further positive behavior.

Given the nature of the event, the tone could have been complemented with more personality in the visuals. Something like:

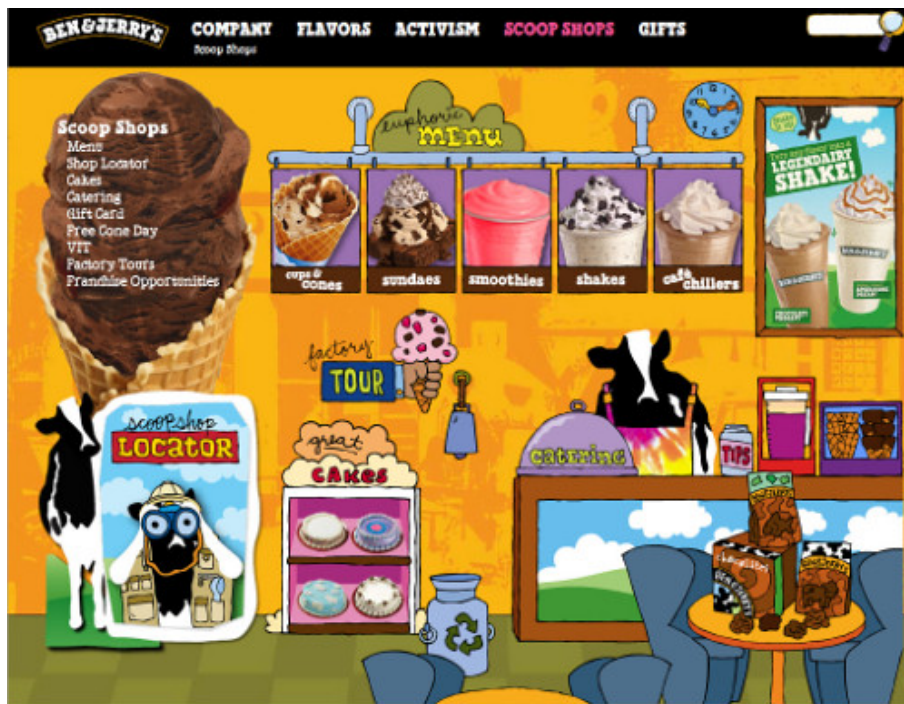


The tone is the same in both graphics, just presented in different ways.

How Others Do It

Let's explore the personality and tone of voice of some well-known brands and organizations. Some get it right, others less so. Let's take a look at Ben & Jerry's¹⁰² website:

¹⁰². <http://www.benjerry.com/>



Ben & Jerry's presenting the various flavours they have available.

Tone of voice doesn't work in isolation here, though. Illustrations, bright colors, a scrapbook feel, sans-serif fonts, animation and a lot of cows all support the friendly, fun and relaxed tone of voice.

Compare that to this more sophisticated and formal home page of the White House¹⁰³:



¹⁰³. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/>

As you'd expect, Ben and Jerry's and the White House have very different tones of voice, but they are appropriate for what they are and fit their personalities.

The White House's website has a traditional color palette (a patriotic combination), a serif typeface, photography rather than illustrations, and a formal and professional tone of voice.

Authenticity And Consistency

While this is getting into other design elements, note that tone of voice can dictate the personality of everything else on the website. It shouldn't be tacked on at the end of the project through a few tweaks to the copy. It needs to be considered from the start so that it can be communicated precisely at all times.

Ben & Jerry's and the White House get it right. Each has found a tone that suits it and represents what it is.

But we often learn more from those who do it wrong.

Let's take LOVEFiLM¹⁰⁴, an online film and game rental service, for example. With this service, you create an account, add films or games to a list, choose a subscription package, and then receive your selections in the mail. No late fees, no deadlines, no return postage costs.

I'm a subscriber, and the service is excellent. The tone of the website is *not*. LOVEFiLM provides entertainment, something fun to help users relax and escape to another world. Its tone of voice should reflect these values, e.g. by pushing the boundaries by playing on famous film quotes and titles. Instead, its personality is very middle-of-the-road.

¹⁰⁴. <http://www.lovefilm.com/welcome/home.html>



LOVEFiLM's home page, lacking in personality

The content and tone don't prevent the user from achieving their objective – it is clear, for example, where to sign up for a free trial – but the tone is boring and formal. Saying something like, “Want free films for a month? Of course you do. Get started here!” would be much more appealing.

LOVEFiLM's unfriendly sign-up and sign-in pages

Again, the user knows what to do here, but the company could really engage users with a distinct tone of voice, building a fun personality and creating a better experience.

This is a big claim, but it shows just how important tone of voice is. If you invest the time to find the tone that best represents who you are, then you are being true to yourself; you're being authentic. If you then communicate in that tone of voice all of the time, both online or offline, then you are being consistent, and you will positively influence how your organization is perceived.

By being authentic and consistent, audiences will understand your brand and have a good experience wherever they are exposed to it. They will recognize you, and your relationship with them will flourish. They will keep coming back because they feel an emotional connection. If you aren't authentic or are trying to be something you are not, then their experience with your brand will be inconsistent, and they will see through you and find it harder to engage with you.

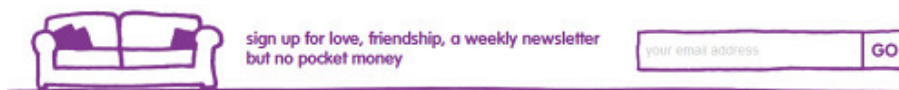
Your tone must lead the way at all times. So, find out who you are, and if that means facing up to some harsh truths, so be it. Perhaps you aren't as fun as you'd like to be; that's OK, as long as your tone of voice reflects that at all times. Being consistent and distinctive in a large organization is harder, but it is still possible.

The surest sign of a lack of authenticity is hearing stakeholders say, "We want to sound like Innocent." Innocent¹⁰⁵ is a company that make smoothies and juices and is well known for its informal and chatty tone of voice. Wanting to be like Innocent is fine if you have the same culture, values and personality. But most companies don't, and they want to be like Innocent just because it has perfected its tone of voice and is regarded as a trailblazer for it.

¹⁰⁵. <http://www.innocentdrinks.co.uk/>



Its quirky print advertisements shows a consistent tone of voice. [Large preview](#)¹⁰⁶.



Innocent's friendly subscription box. [Large preview](#)¹⁰⁷.

By emulating another company's tone of voice, you won't be emulating their success. Admiring the company and being influenced by its tone is fine, but you can't recreate it because too many variables are at play, such as product, service, location and audience.

Is This The End?

No, it's not. Once your content is live, don't leave it unloved. Keep checking that the tone is relevant. Organizations change, perhaps not overnight, but over time; so, if your culture changes, then maybe the tone has to be adapted, too.

That might be a long way off yet, though. First, do an audit and see if your tone is right. If not, then a research and discovery phase will enable you to gather all of the information needed to make informed decisions.

¹⁰⁶. <http://media.smashingmagazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/innocent-ads.jpg>

¹⁰⁷. <http://media.smashingmagazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/nl-innocent-footer.jpg>

At the fore of the decision-making process should be your culture, personality and audience. When you have determined the tone, apply it across the brand so that you establish authenticity and so that the user experience is consistent. Then, audiences will engage with you, feel an emotional connection and keep coming back for more. 🍷

Fluidity Of Content And Design: Learning From Where The Wild Things Are

BY SARAH BAUER 🐾

Have you read *Where the Wild Things Are*? The storybook has fluidity of content and design figured out.

It goes that one night, protagonist Max “wore his wolf suit and made mischief of one kind or another.” He hammers nails into walls, pesters a small dog. Author Maurice Sendak doesn’t explain these hi-jinks textually for the reader. The mischievous acts are illustrated on the right-hand pages. Readers make the narrative connections for themselves.



Photo of the book *Where the Wild Things Are*¹⁰⁸

The words and pictures depend on each other for completeness. Web designers can employ the same complementary dependence of graphic and text in their own work. It encourages a sense of belonging and can create strong first impressions, which are often essential to effective Web design. Because Web design is not confined to page-by-page display as storybooks are, we’ve got no excuse for neglecting Curt

¹⁰⁸. <http://www.amazon.com/Where-Wild-Things-Maurice-Sendak/dp/0060254920>

Cloninger's assertions¹⁰⁹ that a design “has to somehow be relevant to the content, accurately representing its purposes in the medium,” and that “the content has to be useful to the site's audience.”

This chapter explains four strategies for improving fluidity of content and design, and we'll gauge the effectiveness with which several websites use these strategies, taking special note of what we can learn from Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*.

With Graphics As Your Witness

When editing critical papers during my undergrad, I was constantly mindful of backing up every claim I made in writing. Describing a protagonist as “yearning for a return to childhood” wasn't enough to convince a professor unless I could refer to a passage where this was suggested.

Though published way back in 1997, Jakob Nielsen's analysis in “How Users Read the Web¹¹⁰” still offers a storehouse of relevant advice about how users gauge legitimacy online. He suggests that when businesses use promotional language online, they create “cognitive burdens” on their users, slowing down their experience with the website, triggering a filter by which they weigh fact against fiction.

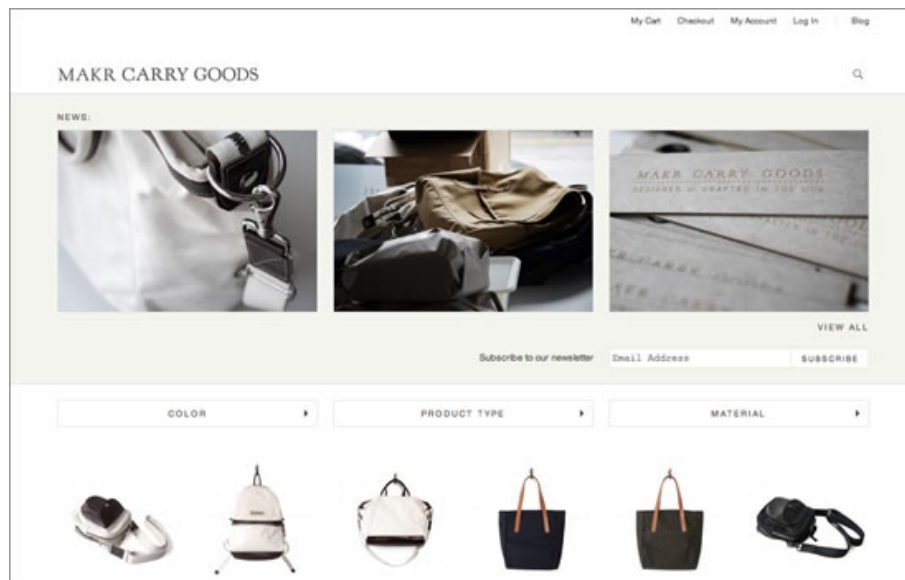
Instead, use design to complement or convey self-promotion, easing user skepticism from the get-go.

Makr Carry Goods¹¹¹ effectively “backs up” its content with graphics to convince users of the “news”-worthiness of its work. In the example below, the visual promotion of the products complements the text: without having to scroll over the images, we see the products themselves as being the news.

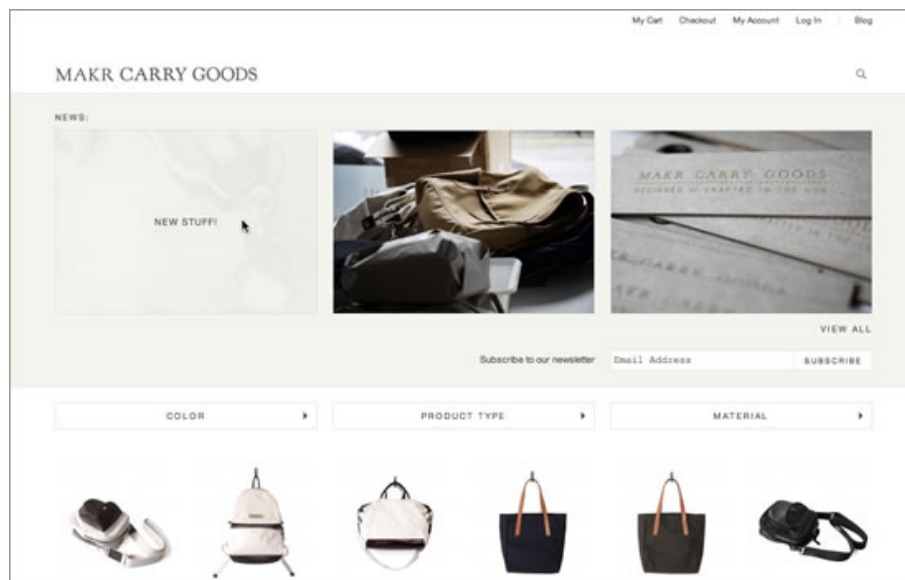
¹⁰⁹. <http://www.alistapart.com/articles/storytelling/>

¹¹⁰. <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/9710a.html>

¹¹¹. <http://www.makr.com/>



Scrolling over the images on top reveals the textual “news”:

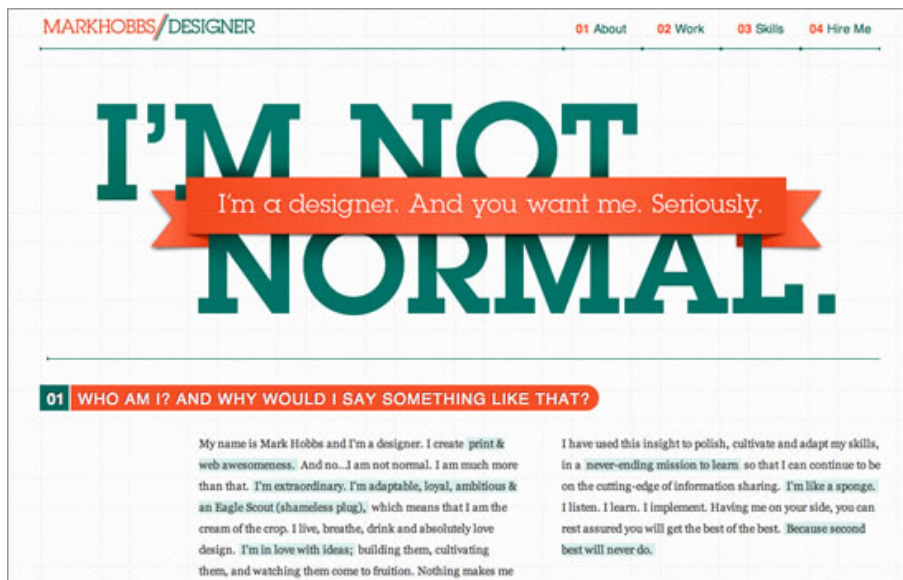


From there, users can carry on their visual journey through the Mark Carry catalogue, enticed to read on by the persistent connection between the product and the news section, a connection that compels users to explore further.

Key to this graphic-textual connection is the visual quality of the products themselves. Without the clean white presentation and professional style, the visuals here might fail to suggest a connection with the news. But the products have been presented to impress.

Without engaging visual confirmation, content will often fail to persuade.

Take Mark Hobbs¹¹²' professional website:



He claims that he's "not normal." He's "extraordinary... adaptable, loyal, ambitious and an Eagle Scout," and he's "like a sponge" (among other things). If he were getting points for descriptiveness, Hobbs would take first place. But he's got no visual evidence of any of these claims. No hint at this lack of normalcy.

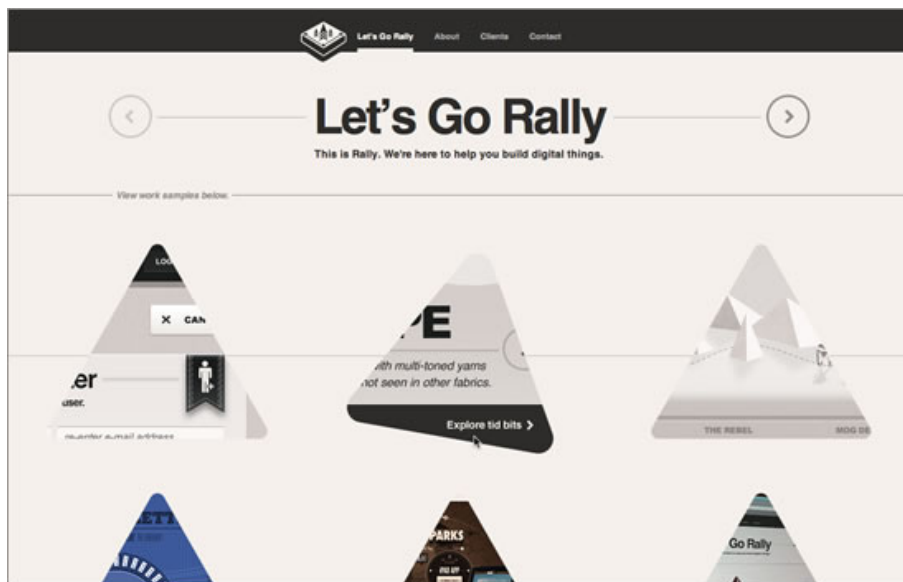
Besides, as Nielsen's studies suggest, users generally dislike "marketingese": writing that is boastful, self-promotional and full of subjective claims. Then again, should claiming not to be normal be considered a boast?

Mark's claims could have been justified by an impressive and immediate visual display of his past work. Engaging users with the strict facts of his expertise could have reinforced his textual claims.

Consider the home page of Rally Interactive¹¹³:

¹¹². <http://markhobbs.net/>

¹¹³. <http://beta.rallyinteractive.com/>



It is “here to help you build digital things.” We know this because of the two immediate examples of its work, presented in triangles that recall other projects that required exceptional skill: the pyramids.

Rally’s folio effectively demonstrates a strategy of fluid content and design. The firm backs up its claim and provides users with an immediately useful and positive association. The visual and verbal prompts coalesce to convince users of Rally’s expertise.

Going back to *Where the Wild Things Are*, if Sendak hadn’t included visuals of Max’s misdoings, what sympathy could we gain for him as his mother sends him up to bed? We can interpret his “mischief” any way we choose, but Sendak’s visual direction helps us gauge what kind of protagonist (or antagonist) Max will be for the remainder of the story. Verbal prompts simply wouldn’t cut it.

Fluid content and design reduce the user’s search time and, in this case, justify the claims made textually. Users don’t have the time or willingness to hunker down and read, particularly when looking for a service. Fluid content and design convince users of the truth of a claim before they even begin to question it.

Tighten Up

Once you’ve eliminated any refutable claims, you might find your content looking a bit sparse. In fact, you want it naked: easy to scan and to the point.

Christine Anameier’s article “[Improving Your Content’s Signal-to-Noise Ratio](http://blog.braintraffic.com/2010/11/improving-your-content’s-signal-to-noise-ratio/)¹¹⁴” points us in the right direction for creating tight content

¹¹⁴. <http://blog.braintraffic.com/2010/11/improving-your-content’s-signal-to-noise-ratio/>

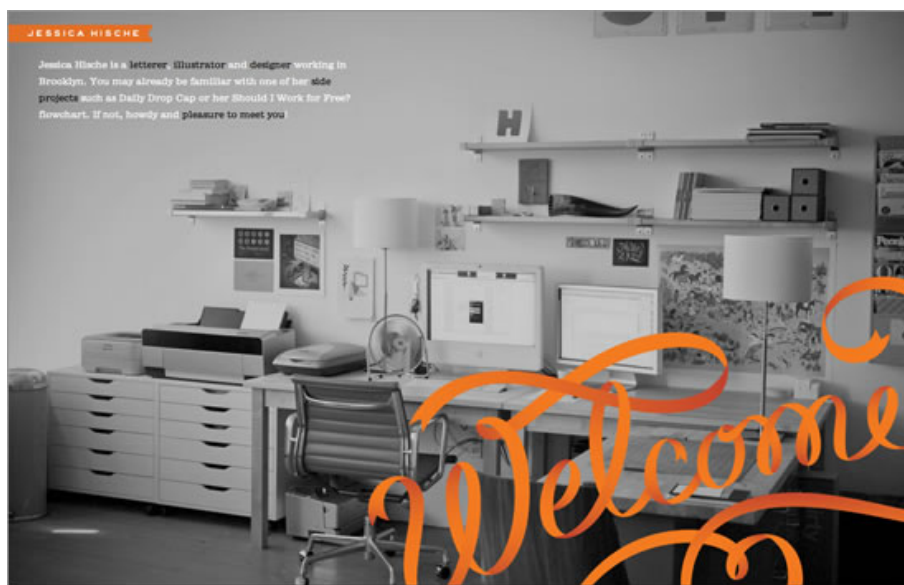
that isn't afraid to depend on suggestive design to share the workload. There will always be information that the user cannot process visually. So, what should you put in text?

Anameier suggests segmentation, prioritization and clear labeling to make the most of your content.

SEGMENTATION

Segmentation entails sectioning content on the page according to audience or task.

The home page for Jessica Hische¹¹⁵'s design portfolio does this effectively:



The home page targets the specific needs of users. Hische has divided the links to her services according to what particular users will be looking for, sparing us long descriptions of each service.

Hische also spares us a textual description of the quality of her service, instead pairing tight layout of text with sprawling, confident design. We can gather from the background a sense that she has clean organization. The orange ribbon font “welcomes” us and puts us at ease so that the text doesn't have to.

PRIORITIZATION

Prioritization, as Anameier says, requires that you “understand your audiences and their tasks, and decide what your website is trying to do.” Structure your website to reflect these tasks, removing any content that

¹¹⁵. <http://jessicahische.is/awesome/>

strays from the path. Hische's home page demonstrates a comprehension of her users' purpose for visiting the website, and it wastes no words.

Content and design fluidity entails deciding what should be explained textually and what should be demonstrated graphically. Hische does not verbally boast about her quality of service. The design does that for her, conveying an array of positive attributes, from classic taste to proficient organization.

Hische recognizes that the first priority of users is not whether she's any good, but whether she offers what they need. Once that is clarified, users will look into the quality. Keyword: *look*.

Creating those fluid user experiences in which content and design cohere requires, as Mark Boulton states in "A Richer Canvas"¹¹⁶, "text that feels connected to the physical form in a binding manner that should make it invisible." Anameier herself says that incorporating "specific and accurate link text, page titles and headings" gives users the luxury of perusing graphic elements on the page without being disrupted by navigation obstacles.

LABELING

Labeling that is structured with the user's goals in mind will be trim and to the point, "invisible," as Boulton suggests, so that the visual showcase enjoys some attention, too.

Tight content that follows Anameier's guidelines will visually suggest your service's qualities and attributes strongly. The description of the service itself will rely heavily on text, but what sets your service apart from others can be conveyed visually. Creating cohesive visual and textual discovery paths for users replicates that same sense of control that users get from the storybook.

Doodle Pad¹¹⁷ superbly utilizes segmentation, prioritization and clear labeling on its "About" page:

¹¹⁶. <http://www.markboulton.co.uk/journal/comments/a-richer-canvas>

¹¹⁷. <http://www.doodlepad.co.za/>



Carrying over the sketch-book theme to its visuals, Doodle Pad sets down user goals with clarity, displaying information directed at clients and creative professionals.

The labelling is clear and styled with familiar doodling motifs that show the user where to look for what they need. Key questions are answered, and the word count is not too shabby for a software concept.

Impressively, Doodle Pad connects the imagery and layout to the overall concept without over-informing or weighing down users with elaborate language. It gives us notebook-style notes for a notebook concept: tight and user-friendly.

Check The Narrative Voice

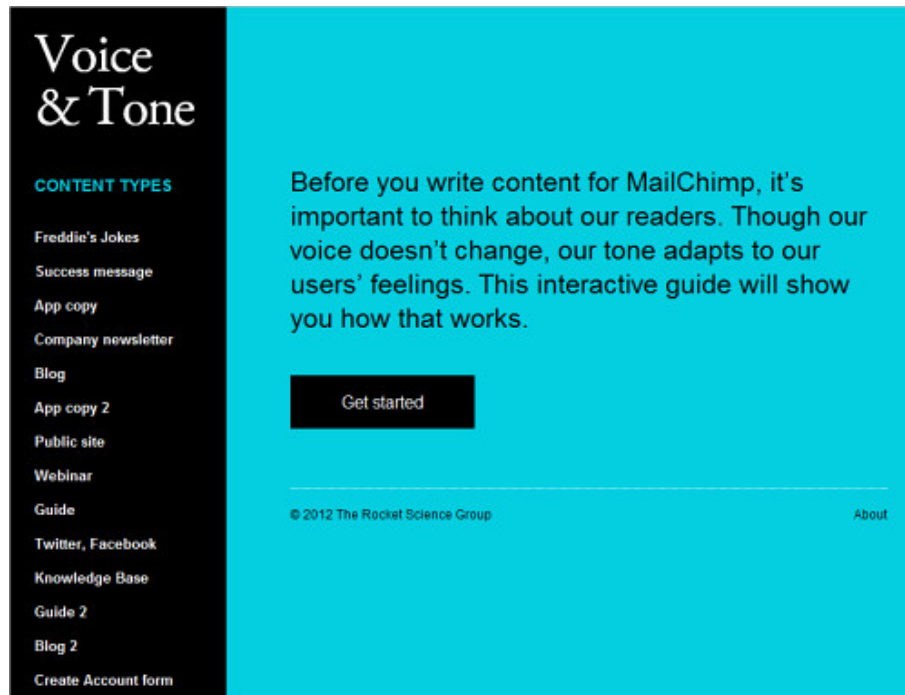
Curt Cloninger's article "[A Case for Web Storytelling](http://www.alistapart.com/articles/storytelling/)¹¹⁸" argues for narrative voice as being an essential consideration for Web designers who want to create engaging user experiences.

Designers are at a great advantage when it comes to synthesizing text with graphics. We can create a rich narrative tone that convinces and directs users. We are able to explore and experiment with the Web's possibilities, going beyond *Where the Wild Things Are* and celebrating non-linear narratives, incorporating several kinds of interactive media.

With Web design, narrative voice need not stay put in the text. It's more flexible than in storybooks, and Cloninger encourages us to play with that.

¹¹⁸. <http://www.alistapart.com/articles/storytelling/>

For instance, look at the layout for MailChimp 5.2¹¹⁹. Toying with slogans that would look out of date on another Web page, the designers evoke nostalgia with their use of background images, color and typography, elements ripe with narrative potential:

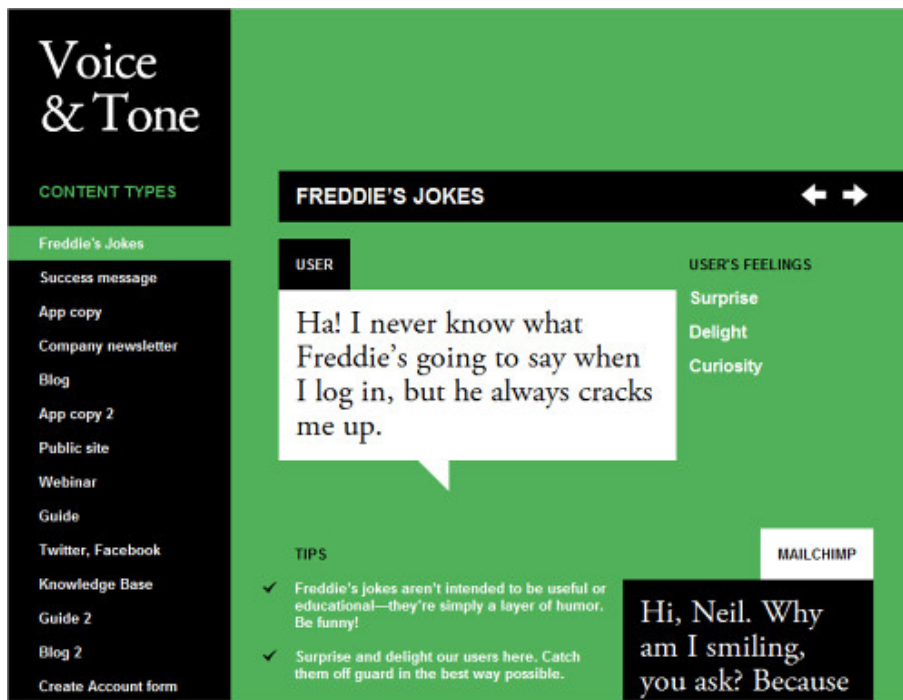


Viewers interpret the slogans the right way because of the text's ironic connection to the design. The “real people behind all those email addresses,” is a wink from the designers, because the viewers recognize that the “real people” in the background don’t look very “real” at all.

Users will commit to a fluid narrative online if the design fully commits to the content. And as Cloninger says, using narrative voice through Web design presents countless possibilities for exploration.

MailChimp explores one such possibility with its demo video, complete with more “wholesome” design and content:

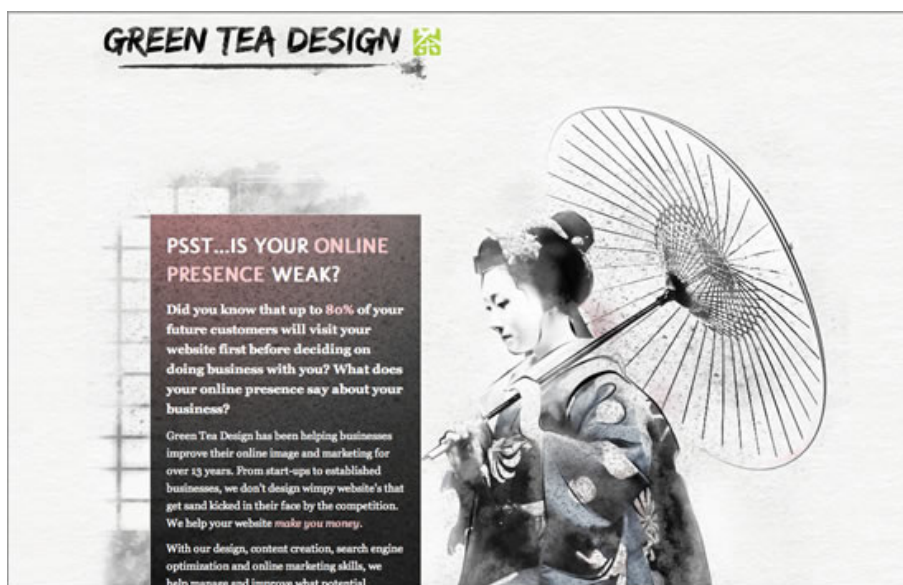
¹¹⁹. <http://mailchimp.com/v5-2/>



Users can expect to be led on this retro journey through the other formats for narrative voice, as the video suggests with its old-school film-reel introduction.

The narrative voice is so woven into the content and design that MailChimp 5.2 could offer all kinds of 1950s-terrific claims and users would be moved to follow along.

MailChimp 5.2 experiments with tailoring content and design to a narrative voice, but it is effective because of its consistency. If it hadn't committed to a particular narrative style, then the escapist spell of this user experience would have been broken.



Green Tea Design¹²⁰ has chosen a watery, traditional Japanese-inspired design for its website. A geisha shades herself with an umbrella, look-

ing down meekly, making for a quiet non-confrontational effect. But look at the aggressive text: “We don’t design wimpy websites that get sand kicked in their face by the competition.” The text goes on the offence, but the design doesn’t align with or enhance the narrative voice.

Try this: choose one adjective with which you’d like users to describe your website. Affix a sticky note of this adjective to the top of your monitor, and measure every sentence on your website against this adjective. Ask yourself whether the content aligns with the adjective. Now pour over your design and assess it by the same measure. We’re looking for matching sensibilities. Does your content and design align with how you want users to feel about the website?

In *Where the Wild Things Are*, the narrative tone is the anchor in Max’s hectic journey. Consistent, calm and matter of fact, even when Max is off dancing with the wild things, the voice elicits the reader’s trust as it sees the protagonist back to safety.

Readers settle into this consistency the way Max settles into his boat for “in and out of weeks / and almost over a year / to where the wild things are,” and again “back over a year / and in and out of weeks / and through a day.” It steadies the commotion in Max’s imagination.

Here, readers recognize the tension between the consistent content and the disruptive visuals as the mark of a superbly imaginative journey, where anything can happen, but where eventually everyone must return home.

The narrative commits to this tension until the end, when Max gets back to his room, where dinner is waiting for him, “and it was still hot.”

As a children’s storybook, *Where the Wild Things Are* doesn’t employ multiple forms of narrative expression. But it is an effective example of the co-dependence of playful and experimental text and visuals, in which the narrative voice incites chaos and calms the senses at the same time.

One last example of a committed narrative voice:

120. <http://greenteadesign.ca/>



Recalling Gold Rush-era drama and Victorian carnival sights with its effective design elements, *Forefathers*¹²¹ maintains an adventurous tone, employing text that is consistent, descriptively appropriate and authentic.

Be Mindful Of The User Experience

As Elizabeth McGuane and Randall Snare state in “Making Up Stories: Perception, Language and the Web¹²²,” as Web users scan pages, they are “filling in the gaps-making inferences, whether they’re based on past experience... or elaborate associations drawn from our imaginations.”

Trust the user to connect the graphics and text, and expect them to want to. Cloninger says that “the more power a user has to control the narrative himself, the more a visitor will ‘own’ that narrative.”

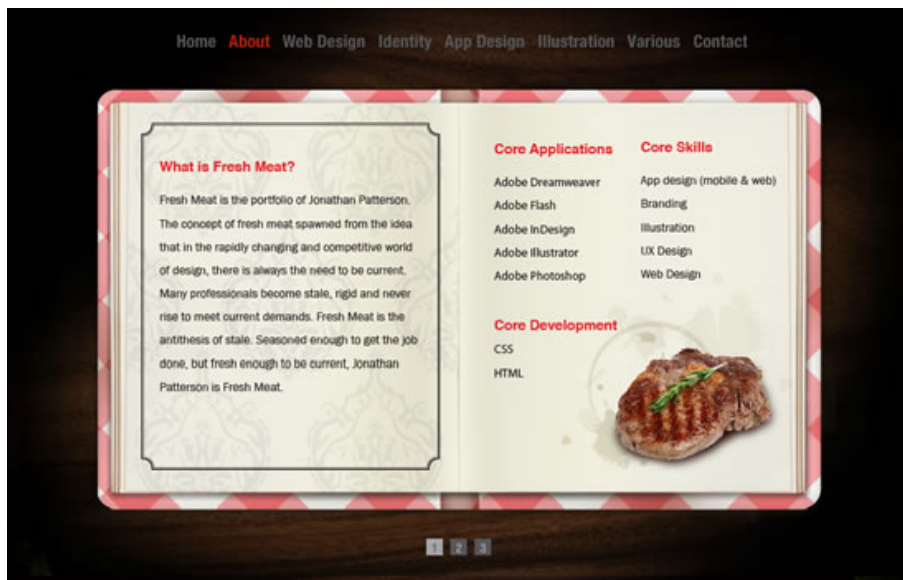
Keep the descriptions visual. The acts of “mischief” in *Where the Wild Things Are* are graphic. The connection is made when both elements are harmonized into one idea. The user will be willing to read the text and view the corresponding image if both elements are compelling.

Looking at Jonathan Patterson¹²³’s effective online portfolio, we can see he has maintained a fluidity of content and design by basing the user’s experience on the motif of “fresh meat”:

¹²¹. <http://forefathersgroup.com/>

¹²². <http://www.alistapart.com/articles/making-up-stories-perception-language-and-the-web/>

¹²³. <http://www.jonathanpatterson.com/>

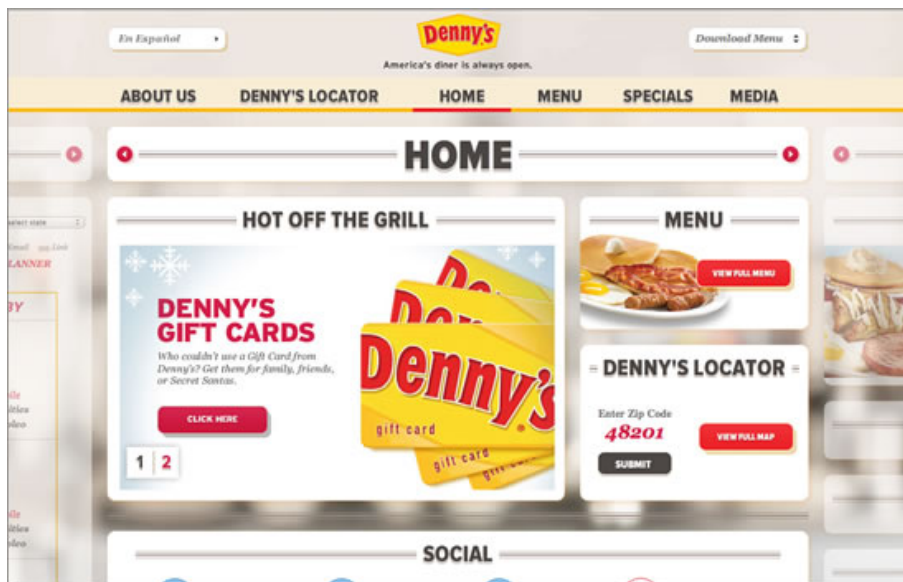


Patterson’s “About” page looks like a steakhouse menu. The text on the first page hints at a description of a meal, while suggesting the page’s function. The website can be flipped through like a menu, giving the user choice and control. The text is simple and linear, mirroring the sequence of appetizer, main course and dessert in a restaurant menu. Fluid text and design help Patterson to create a particular experience with his portfolio.

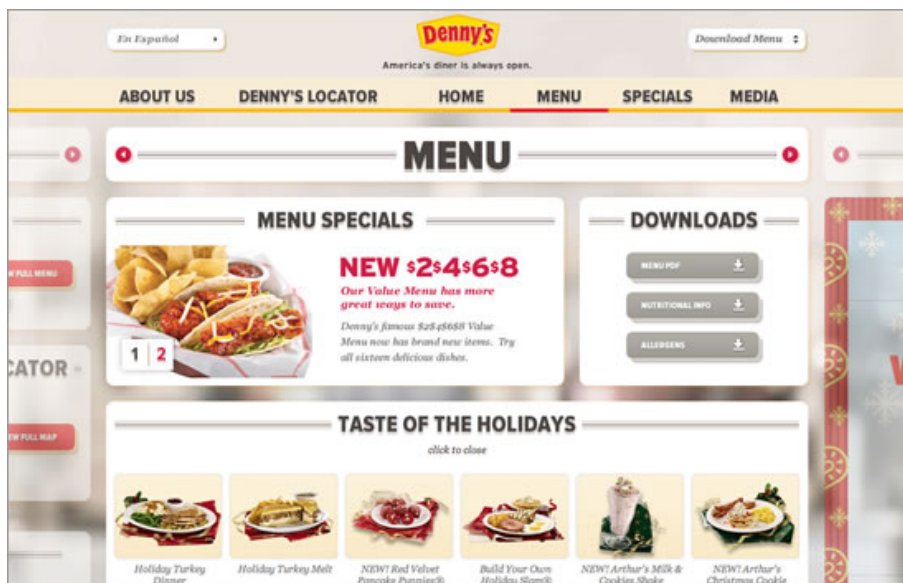
Maurice Sendak employs similar tactics in *Where the Wild Things Are*, encouraging readers to expand their gaze to match Max’s ever-growing visual landscape. As Max moves out of his room and onto the sea, the content on the right-hand pages (otherwise bordered in thick white space) creeps over gradually, thrusting more colors onto the facing page. At one point, a sea monster appears on the left-hand page, which was otherwise reserved for text and white space.

Here is the user experience at its most polished. The change comes quietly, invisibly, but the reader is aware that something is different. The protagonist’s growth has been connected with the reader’s experience of the narrative through the placement and cohesion of text and image.

Another polished example of fluidity in content and design can be found in an actual restaurant’s website layout:



Yes, Denny's¹²⁴. Look familiar? Replicating the experience of perusing a Denny's menu, this layout shows how, in Patrick Lynch's words¹²⁵, "visual design and user research can work together to create better user experiences on the Web: experiences that balance the practicalities of navigation with aesthetic interfaces that delight the eye and the brain."



The user controls the narrative here, with fluid navigation options that maintain the menu-like aspect of the layout, and a pleasing visual presentation that, as Lynch says, "enhances usability." Filling in the gaps between glancing over a Denny's menu and browsing the website, users feel encouraged to control their experience.

¹²⁴. <http://www.dennys.com/>

¹²⁵. <http://www.alistapart.com/articles/visual-decision-making/>

Conclusion

Fluidity of content and design requires that you trust users to make connections. By making the tone consistent, backing up your claims, tightening the text and being sensitive to the user's experience, you can be assured that users will draw the conclusions you want them to draw. Designers of promotional Web projects can learn these lessons in part from storybooks such as *Where the Wild Things Are*, which demonstrates the essential elements of user control and delight. Trust your inner child; it won't steer you wrong. 🐾

The Role Of Design In The Kingdom Of Content

BY JASON GROSS 🍷

If content sits at the top of the food chain, why do we spend so much time talking about the finer points of design? Every day we debate, experiment with and discuss topics that easily fall into the category of aesthetics, enhanced functionality and layout; in fact, relatively rarely do we talk about content. Nevertheless, even though we should concede that content is king in this realm, this doesn't mean that design should be devalued.

It may seem logical that the user experience lives and dies by how the user relates on an emotional level to the content on a website. But this is not necessarily the case. From a design perspective, our job is to maximize the value of every visitor, whether they love the content or hate it. The role of a UX designer is not always to make everyone feel all warm and fuzzy inside. A rich Web experience could include the emotion of happiness, humor, discontent, sadness, anger or enlightenment. A well-designed website enables us to attribute our emotion to its source and connect us to that environment through a range of senses. A UX designer should understand why and how to utilize the principles and techniques they have learned to support the website's precious content.

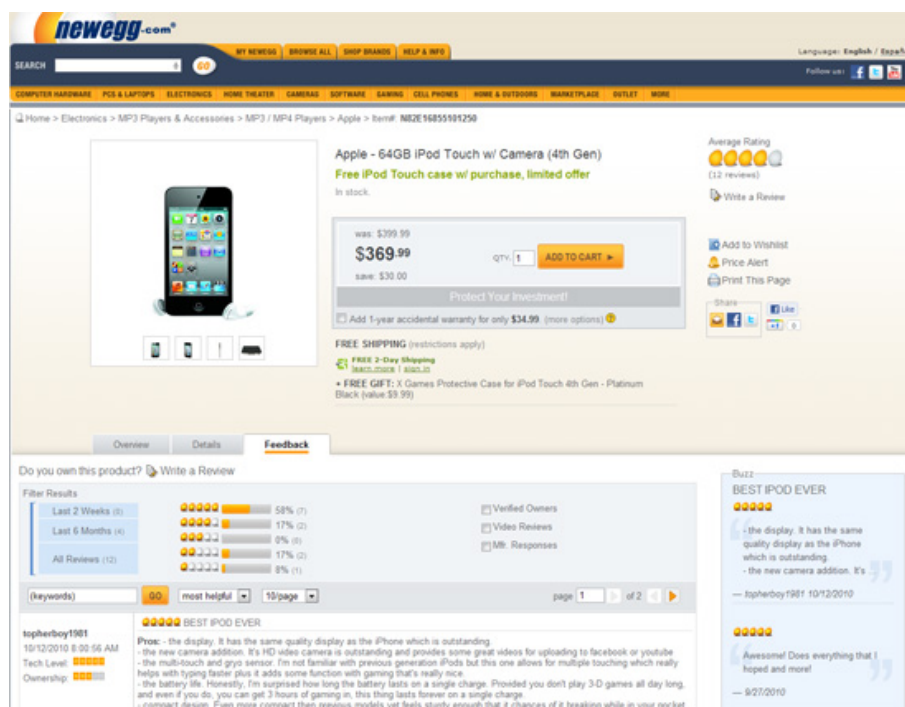
Justifying User Experience Design

Investing in UX design as an amplifier of good content is not always an easy process. In many industries, a product that fills a demand and that works as it should is good enough. Most of us don't care how an ink pen or a computer monitor makes us feel, as long as it works. A large portion of the Web still reflects this sentiment, as do clients and project managers who haven't been educated in the value of UX.

A website is a much more involved product than an ink pen and calls for a different measurement of user satisfaction. A product that merely meets demand and works correctly does not suit a medium that is so highly interactive and saturated. As designers, our task sometimes is to convince other parties of the value of building a user's personal engagement with the website's content. Fortunately, we have examples of companies that have done UX right and that have the success to show for it.

As a geek who enjoys building computers, I look to Newegg¹²⁶ as a good example of a company that has played to its strengths to deliver a superior user experience. In its early days, Newegg's fair prices and lightning-fast delivery of computer components made it the place to shop for IT people. This was all great, but the real kicker was that users who loved to share product strengths and weaknesses with each other could do it all on Newegg's website.

This turned out to be a fantastic benefit for new users, who were inclined to trust the experience and suggestions of people they regarded as peers. As a result, Newegg built a massive army of geeks who generated content and provided an extremely valuable experience to its users. If you had a device or component that was functioning oddly or not at all, chances are that someone had shared the cause and maybe even a solution in a Newegg review.



Newegg acted on this opportunity the right way by using design to highlight its most valuable content. While its design may not be the slickest or most modern, Newegg provides a great experience and has high user satisfaction. Ratings and reviews by peers have become a driving force in Newegg's design and populate nearly every page. As the design has evolved over the years, product reviews have floated to the surface of nearly every page, and the system for contributing reviews has grown in depth and functionality as well. Newegg even took this to the next level with a recent nationwide ad campaign¹²⁷ and design. All

¹²⁶. <http://www.newegg.com/>

of this came about because Newegg identified which of its content made for a strong user experience and built on it, which should be done in every Web project.

Identifying the content that makes you stand out is only the first piece of this puzzle. What we really want to explore is how to take everything we have learned about color theory, lines, shapes and visual movement and apply it to our content in a way that doesn't just decorate it or even make it pop on the page, but rather that supports the conversion of a goal or delivery of a message. Much like how the primary function of petals on a flower is to attract insects to pollinate, good design ensures that your website will thrive. All of that great design talent needs to be applied not only to the content but to the layer before and after it as well.

The Delicious Design Sandwich

With virtually every website, good UX design can be sectioned into three parts or events: introduction, consumption and reaction. Content is at the core, the meat of what the user is looking for, and on both sides of the content are events that are driven by a well-executed design.

USER INTRODUCTION

The Web is a world of first impressions, and quick ones at that¹²⁸. Users form an opinion of a website within the first few seconds¹²⁹ of loading it. This means that the colors, the layout and the presentation of headings are all evaluated before any content is actually absorbed. Users are inclined to scan content until they zero in on something that piques their interest. Regardless of what your content actually says, the design around it controls what the users see first and how their eyes move across the sections of the page.

In addition to searching for interesting information, users will also be determining how credible this resource is¹³⁰. Despite being constantly taught that we shouldn't judge a book by its cover, all of us are susceptible to trusting a resource based on our familiarity with it, what our peers think of it and the time and money that we estimate was put into its construction.

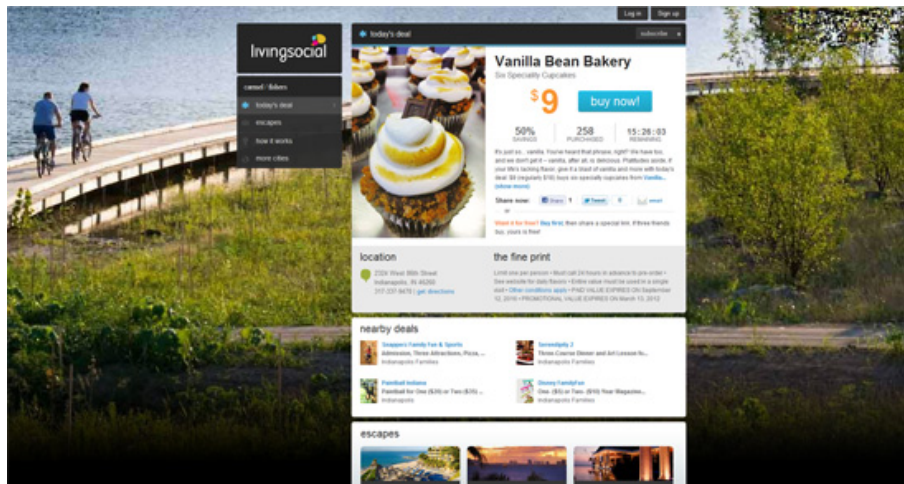
¹²⁷. http://promotions.newegg.com/nepro/11-1318/v2/index.html?cm_sp=Homepage_LB_-_nepro/11-1318/

¹²⁸. <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/whyscanning.html>

¹²⁹. <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/page-abandonment-time.html>

¹³⁰. <http://credibility.stanford.edu/>

Living Social¹³¹ takes advantage of this in its design in multiple ways. A quick scan of the main page after the user has entered an email address and location reveals several techniques that have been implemented to elicit a reaction from the user.

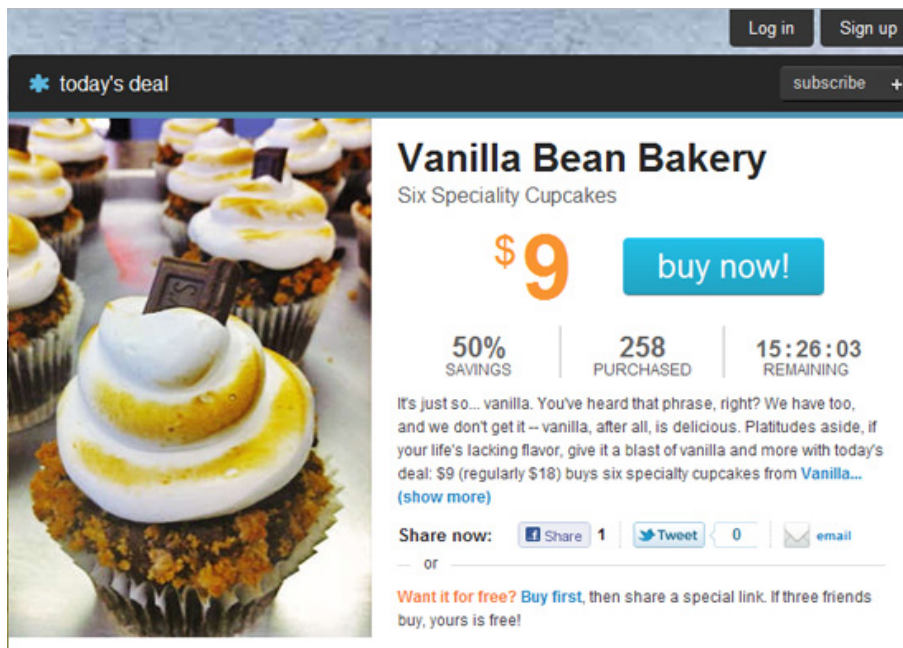


Perhaps most striking is the background image. In every city that Living Social serves, a background picture loads that the visitor can relate to. I immediately connected with this website because I did a double-take at the background image and realized that I pass by this area all the time: it's just down the road from me!

Living Social has also done the little things right. A clear hierarchy is established on the page through the headings and content modules; the call to action is the most prominent element; and the interactions oriented around engagement are easily accessible. The counters that tell you how many people have bought the deal and how much time you have left generate sufficient peer pressure¹³².

¹³¹. <http://livingsocial.com>

¹³². <http://www.uxbooth.com/blog/psychological-manipulation-in-ecommerce-design/>



When all is said and done, Living Social has invested in the introduction side of its design, which makes a lot of sense given its content. Living Social and the other daily deal websites thrive on a high volume of quick visits, which means they often live and die on first impressions. The heavy emphasis on the impression portion of this design begins with the content. Instead of fitting content into a design concept, Living Social has wrapped an appropriate design around the content that it wants to feature. But we aren't done there.

CONTENT CONSUMPTION

Even in the process of consuming content that we've proposed, design plays a huge role. The crucial rules of typography control the experience that users have when reading articles. The mood of images and video can vary drastically based on their aesthetic setting. If your primary content is user-generated, then the ability of users to interact with the website and each other will be driven by the interface you've designed.

More than anything else, content is an opportunity to set the tone of the website. We have all witnessed the untold damage that is done when content that should have a professional tone is set in Comic Sans. The font face, size and color can do an amazing job of controlling how your website says something that leaves an impression on users, which leads to the final piece of our sandwich. Along these lines, the way you frame entire portions of the website gives the audience clues as to what their emotional reaction should be.

We see this naturally develop with websites created by designers for their own peers. Portfolios, design-related apps, and websites for net-

works and conferences are all designed for tone. Of course, getting too extravagant in an attempt to impress is the opposite of what we are trying to achieve here. However, in the case of a conference about HTML and CSS, a website that experiments with the edges of what's possible with HTML and CSS is an appropriate setting for the content.



Like many websites for technology and design conferences, The Combine¹³³ in Bloomington, Indiana, is highly design-driven. In addition to the slick HTML and CSS that will resonate with the professionals being targeted, the aesthetics intentionally reflect the small-town atmosphere of Bloomington. The same features that distinguish the location of this conference also encourage users to identify with the design.

USER REACTION

This may be the most understated design-driven activity on a website, but it carries huge value. How the user responds to your content is pivotal to the website's success. These days, merely delivering content is not enough¹³⁴. The Web has a wealth of information and options. In order for a website to enjoy any success, it must take advantage of referrals, links and maybe a bit of buzz on social networks. If we want to stand out on the Web, our users need to share our content with friends or contribute their own thoughts, reactions and content.

YouTube serves as a practical example of building an experience around the user's reaction. YouTube kickstarted the concept of viral videos, but getting there required that the website be designed around

¹³³. <http://www.thecombine.org/>

¹³⁴. <http://www.alistapart.com/articles/indefenseofeyecandy>

the content itself. We all know that a massive amount of content is uploaded to YouTube every day, but the degree to which a video goes viral depends on how encouraged the user feels and how easily they are able to share or contribute to the experience.



It doesn't take a trained eye to see this in action all over any given YouTube page. Suggested and related videos are always available, along with the option to share a video on your favorite social network or embed it anywhere on the Web. Of course, the design was not made to look good on its own and then this functionality shoehorned in. Again, the emphasis is on the content, and the design elements that result in the user's reaction are all rooted in sharing or exploring that content.

In a world driven by likes, tags, tweets, shares and votes, the follow-through that a website and its content facilitates becomes a massive factor in its success or failure. A user who visits a website, views the content and then leaves generates little value for the business. For this reason, we see blog articles sprinkled and even littered with related content, suggested videos that come up after you watch a clip, and quick and easy share and save buttons everywhere. The follow-through on each of these actions is highly design-driven. The color, shape, size and location of links and buttons determine whether a visitor sees them quickly or not. But, of course, we can't expect everyone to play the role that we define for them...

Designing For An Experience

As important a role as design plays in the perception of and reaction to your content, people still argue that a user experience cannot truly be designed¹³⁵. Of course, the user ultimately decides how they engage

with any design. If the goal of a design is to convert every single user into a customer, then failure is the only outcome. We can, however, design an experience that connects immediately with a target audience, delivers information with a clear tone and purpose, and encourages a response.

We want to design an experience for users who are willing to buy into it. Users come to your website most likely because they already have some interest in digging into the content, which means they are willing to play into the experience that you have designed. If a user stumbles on the website by mistake, then taking them all the way to the reaction stage of the experience becomes more of a bonus than a goal.

Different techniques for driving engagement with content can be found across the Web. If you've been to the blog xheight¹³⁶ lately, you may have noticed its effort to prioritize the content in its posts. In addition to the minimalist design, the designer further isolates the content by fading elements out of view after your cursor has been idle for a few moments, leaving the article you are reading as the only element on the page.



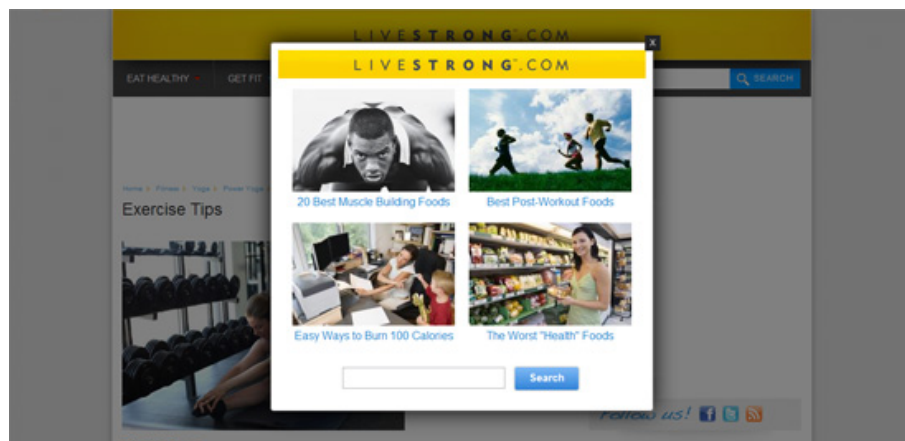
¹³⁵. <http://uxdesign.smashingmagazine.com/2011/03/15/why-user-experience-cannot-be-designed/>

¹³⁶. <http://xheight.co.uk>



The jury is still out on whether this makes for a better or more distracting reading experience, but this design decision clearly centers on the content that the designer wants to deliver.

A different technique is apparent on the Livestrong¹³⁷ website. When the user hits the browser’s address bar or tries to click away after reading an article, a modal window with related content pops up. It’s interesting that the modal window is enabled only in the blog section of Livestrong, and not by mistake. With a website this rich in content and from so recognizable a brand, the designers could assume that the majority of traffic to these articles would come from search engines. The goal here is to keep users from jumping back to Google for more content and to have them continue engaging with the content here.



Editor’s note: The Live Strong site no longer has this feature since it seems to have been modified right before we published this article.

¹³⁷. <http://www.livestrong.com/>

Keep Designing

Now as much as ever, companies are recognizing the value that good design and a solid user experience can bring to them. UX design is about developing a road map for the user, encouraging certain actions, and developing a user base that *wants* to engage with your content.

The key to driving this engagement is to ensure that we value design in the right way, not simply as a template, theme or color scheme but as a support system for key content. We can use design to make a website unique and more memorable. We do this by laying the foundation of a good impression, enabling smooth and meaningful consumption, and encouraging engagement with the content. All three of these areas are opportunities to drive a user experience that is in harmony with our content. 🐼

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- “In Defense of Eye Candy¹³⁸”
Dig deeper into how we react emotionally to aesthetically diverse elements.
- *Emotional Design: Why We Love (or Hate) Everyday Things*¹³⁹
This book by Donald Norman focuses on how the design of a product plays a huge role in our emotional connection to it.
- “Eye Candy vs. Bare-bones in UI Design¹⁴⁰”
This article compares the pros and cons of simplistic design compared to eye candy, and how to find the right balance in your project.

¹³⁸. <http://www.alistapart.com/articles/indefenseofeyecandy>

¹³⁹. <http://www.amazon.com/Emotional-Design-Love-Everyday-Things/dp/0465051359>

¹⁴⁰. <http://uxmag.com/design/eye-candy-vs-bare-bones-in-ui-design>

How Disregarding Design Limits The Power Of Content

BY CHRISTOPHER BUTLER 🍷

It appears to be a reader's market. More written content is freely available than ever before, accessible in just about every format you could imagine. If you want it on paper, you've got it. On screen? What size, friend? We can shrink, stretch and stitch it all together every which way because, really, we're just talking about words here... Or are we?

As soon as I ask that question, several others quickly follow:

- Is content so flexible?
- Is content's most basic unit the word? Or is it, perhaps, the message?
- In today's reader's market, what of the writers and the designers who make reading possible?
- And are we building tools that honor their work, too?

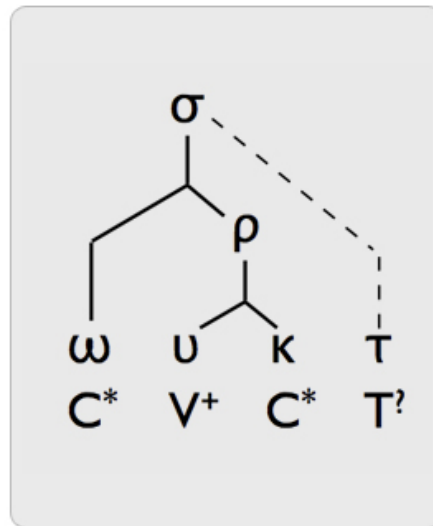
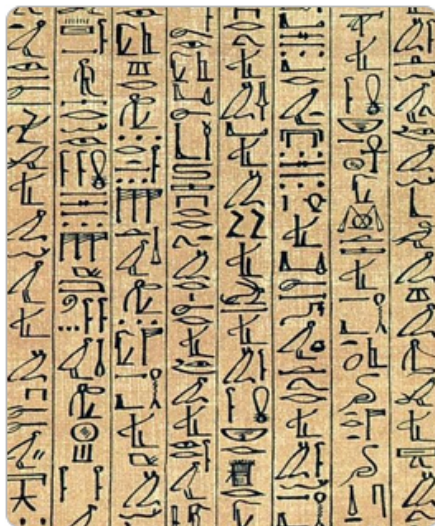
These questions didn't randomly pop into my head one day. Nor did a design problem get me thinking along these lines. It was while reading — for pleasure — that I noticed something was wrong. After experimenting with a few different services that let me save articles to read later in a much more reader-friendly format (what I've come to call "reading advocacy" tools) it occurred to me that in the process of extracting content from its original context and accessing it elsewhere, I might be losing some information along the way.

I decided to see for myself by examining several pieces of content and comparing how they look and function in a variety of incarnations: the printed page, the Web and eReaders. What I found was both encouraging and, for a designer who loves to read and write, slightly troubling. I'll warn you in advance: there are many examples below, but I think they're all necessary in order to convey an accurate picture of just what happens to content when we start moving it around. To properly set it up, let's first briefly look back in history.

A Very Brief History of Content and Design

Long ago, when we humans first began writing things down, there wasn't a clear difference between pictures and words. In the earliest examples of writing, symbols depicted nameable things – a bird, a mountain, fire, rain. You could combine a few pictograms to communicate something more sophisticated, but that got writers only so far. Some concepts are difficult to describe with images alone. The development of primitive accounting records, though, further abstracted writing.

In order to properly document the wealth and splendor of their kings, Sumerian scribes had to repeatedly etch up to hundreds of animal pictograms onto clay tablets. Cow after cow after cow. Sheep after sheep after sheep. You can imagine how extreme repetition would abstract the symbols they used: the simpler the character, the faster the etching.



On the left, an example of logographic¹⁴¹ writing. On the right, an example of syllabic¹⁴² writing. (Source: Wikipedia)

Even though the leap from logographic (i.e. symbols that represent words) and syllabic (i.e. symbols that represent sounds) writing to alphabetic systems that approximate what we would recognize today was a profound one – believe me, I just simplified around 2,500 years of the history of writing right there – we still had quite a way to go. After all, the earliest example of punctuation didn't come until about 840 BCE, when the battle victories of a Jordanian ruler named Mesha¹⁴³ were carved in stone for posterity.

¹⁴¹. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Logogram>

¹⁴². <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syllabary>

¹⁴³. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mesha_Stele

Distinguishing between upper and lowercase letters didn't happen until much, much later, and it didn't really take off until literacy expanded greatly — say, after the printing press. Imagine reading anything today without capitalization or punctuation. But you're not reading this for a history lesson. The story of writing is far too big to be told here. And really, I have no business telling it. Yet skimming the surface of history reveals a deeper relationship between images and words than we often realize.

Sometimes words are enough. Other times, they need accompaniment. Even the arrangement of words can carry meaning. Let's look at a practical example.

EVEN BASIC FORMATTING CARRIES MEANING

The image displays three versions of an oatmeal raisin cookie recipe, illustrating how formatting affects readability and perceived quality.

Version 1 (Left): Plain Text
Oatmeal Raisin Cookie Recipe: First, preheat oven to 350 degrees. Cream the sugars and butter together in a bowl (it helps to leave the butter out for a while to soften it first):
1 cup brown sugar, 1 cup white/granulated sugar, 2 sticks butter. Then, beat in and mix with the sugar/butter mixture: 1 tsp vanilla, 2 eggs. Set that aside and mix the following dry ingredients in a separate bowl: 2 cups flour, 1 tsp salt, 1 tsp baking soda, 1 tsp baking powder. Next, combine the dry and wet ingredients. Then mix in: 3 cups dry oatmeal, 1 tbsp ground cinnamon (this is the 'secret' ingredient- I tend to add a lot of it), 2 cups raisins. A few notes: - I don't use an electric mixer. I do it all by hand, mostly because I've never had a mixer, but I think it might make the cookies better. When balling up the dough to shape the cookies, I spoon a pretty large soup spoon's worth and then roll it into a ball. I like these cookies big. I don't know how long they should bake. My guess is that every oven is different, so I just peek and pull them out when they get slightly brown. I like them chewy.

Version 2 (Middle): Structured Text
Oatmeal Raisin Cookie Recipe
First, preheat oven to 350 degrees.
Cream the sugars and butter together in a bowl (it helps to leave the butter out for a while to soften it first):
1 cup brown sugar
1 cup white/granulated sugar
2 sticks butter
Then, beat in and mix with the sugar/butter mixture:
1 tsp vanilla
2 eggs
Set that aside and mix the following dry ingredients in a separate bowl:
2 cups flour
1 tsp salt
1 tsp baking soda
1 tsp baking powder
Next, combine the dry and wet ingredients. Then mix in:
3 cups dry oatmeal
1 tbsp ground cinnamon (this is the

Version 3 (Right): Highly Formatted
THE BEST
Oatmeal Raisin Cookies
INGREDIENTS
1 cup brown sugar 2 cups flour
1 cup sugar 1 tsp salt
2 sticks butter 1 tsp baking soda
1 tsp vanilla 1 tsp baking powder
2 eggs 3 cups dry oatmeal
2 cups raisins
DIRECTIONS
1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees.
2. Cream the sugars and butter together in a bowl. Then, beat in and mix the vanilla and eggs.
3. Set aside and mix the flour, salt, baking soda, baking powder, and cinnamon in a separate bowl.
4. Next, combine the dry and wet ingredients. Then, mix in the oatmeal and raisins.
NOTES
I don't use an electric mixer; I do it all by hand, mostly because I've never had a mixer, but I think it might make the cookies better. When

What you're looking at above is a recipe for cookies. (Very delicious cookies, I might add.) I realize it's difficult to read, but the fact that these three images are small enough to fit nicely on this page actually serves an important point.

Look at the image on the left. Can you make out what kind of information the text is conveying? It's not impossible, but it will take you a bit of time and squinting at the words to figure out what they are about in general. But as you make your way to the right, the job gets progressively easier. The words haven't changed, but the way they are formatted has. Formatting, which is really just the way information is organized and arranged on the page, is design in its most basic sense. So, you might also say that as the attention paid to the design of this recipe increases, the more immediately recognizable its content becomes — and the more useful it becomes to an aspiring baker.

The simple lesson of this recipe is that formatting is more than just an aesthetic, secondary treatment of information. Formatting in and of

itself contains information that enables the reader to better perceive the nature of the text or, in other words, the kind of message it contains. In the case of this recipe, the cookies produced by any of the three versions would be equally good, but the likelihood that the cookies would be made at all depends directly on the recipe's formatting. Most would not quickly recognize that the version on the left is a recipe at all; you'd probably recognize the one on the right immediately.

Anyone interested in communicating more effectively should reflect on the degree to which the format — or lack thereof — of their content supports or undermines the content's message.

Fortunately, we're pretty good at preserving formatting that is critical to the meaning of written content. If I put the best-formatted version of my recipe on the Web, I'd be confident that readers would see it that way whether they printed it out or read it off the screen. The basics of formatting — fonts, line breaks, numbered and bulleted lists, etc. — are easily implemented and transferred, regardless of the context.

But sometimes the design of a page carries meaning that is substantially visual and that is not so easily preserved because it's not a matter of simple formatting. History again provides a helpful example.

ONE MORE BRIEF TRIP BACK IN TIME

The image below comes from one of the most well-known illuminated manuscripts, The Book of Kells¹⁴⁴, famous for an extravagance in visual detail found in very few manuscripts like it. Written in Latin, this Gospel book is believed to have been created sometime around the year 800 by Celtic monks living in the Abbey of Kells in Ireland.

¹⁴⁴. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_kells



What is immediately obvious is that this manuscript was not created merely to transmit the text contained therein. While the message of the text was central to the lives of the monks – religiously, culturally, even practically – the creation of the manuscript was an art that brought life to the book’s deeper meaning and its role in the tradition that coalesced around it. In other words, the role of design and imagery in the illuminated manuscripts was not one of formatting. It had less to do with utility – making reading easier – than with meaningful expression. Its entire purpose would be lost if the text and imagery were separated.

What the earliest writing, my cookie recipe and the illuminated manuscripts all have to teach us is that design – whether in the most basic features of a line of text or in the subtle juxtaposition of words and imagery – is integral to the transmission of meaning and cannot be isolated from the content.

Content And Design On The Web

So far, this all makes sense from the perspective of design philosophy. But how does the relationship between design and content play out in practice? To investigate this, I’d like to share several real-world examples of how context affects content – the examples I promised at the beginning of this chapter.

1. INTERCONNECTED

17:43, Saturday 7 May., 2011 [Link](#)

Books read February to April 2011, by date finished:

- [Bluebeard](#), Kurt Vonnegut (4 Feb)
- [My Name is Legion](#), Roger Zelazny (7 Feb)
- [The Boy Who Would Live Forever](#), Frederik Pohl (20 Feb)
- [Generation X](#), Douglas Coupland (12 Mar)
- [Neuromancer](#), William Gibson (24 Mar)
- [The Cybernetic Brain: Sketches of Another Future](#), Andrew Pickering (7 April)
- [Ascents of Wonder](#), David Gerrold (editor) (8 Apr)
- [Glasshouse](#), Charles Stross (9 Apr)
- [In the Bone: the best science fiction of Gordon R Dickson](#), Gordon R Dickson (15 Apr)
- [Incident on Ath: Dumarest Saga 18](#), E C Tubb (17 Apr)
- [The Explorers](#), C M Kornbluth (22 Apr)
- [Taurus Four](#), Rena Vale (24 Apr)
- [Only the Paranoid Survive](#), Andrew S Grove (24 Apr)
- [The Checklist Manifesto](#), Atul Gawande (30 Apr)

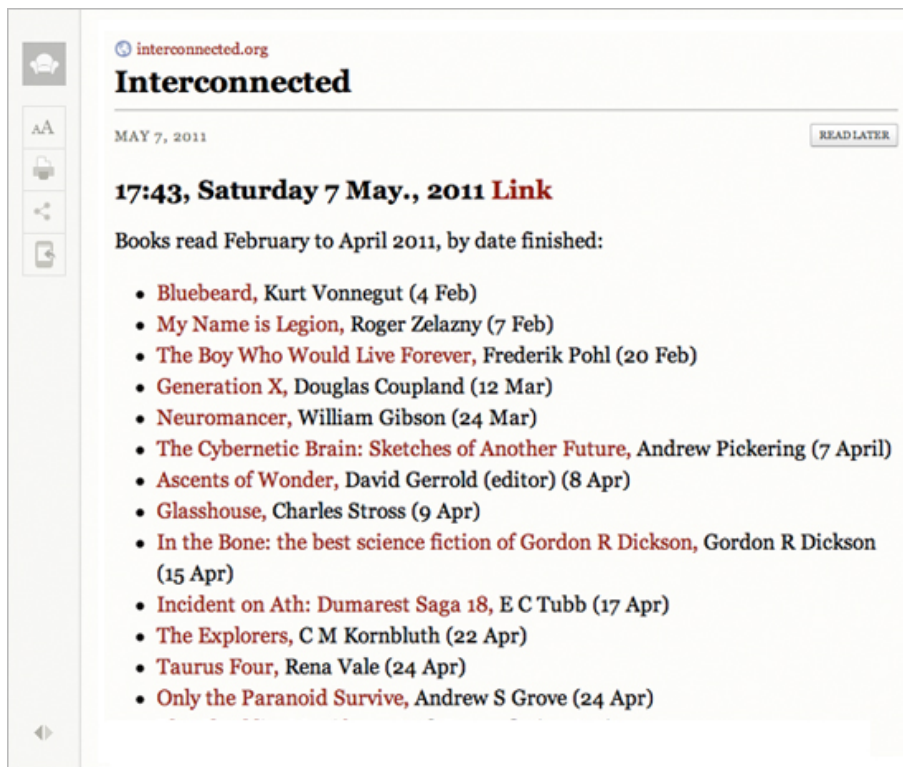
It's rare to find a second-hand bookshop in London with a good cache of science fiction nowadays. People buy up the books and sell them online. But I ran across one, way out of the way, and picked up a half dozen books and collections of short stories from the 1940s-1970s. The short stories are the best: *Ascents of Wonders*, *In the Bone*, *The Explorers*, and *The Complete Venus Equilateral* (not on this list as I only finished it today) are all worth picking up. It's weird reading old stories -- some of the ideas were copied so many times they've become bored tropes. But others ideas never made it into the mainstream and are as fresh as the day they were written. And then of course there's the pleasure of the history diving of it all: the 1940s were all engineering-led, the 1970s all psychology. From outer space to inner space.

Interconnected¹⁴⁵ is the personal website of Matt Webb, the CEO of Berg¹⁴⁶, a wonderful design studio in London. As you can see, Matt has kept his website's design very minimal. In fact, besides the fact that Matt is a very interesting person and I've been cyberstalking him for years, I chose his website as my first example precisely because it's so minimal. But let's see what this same blog post looks like when I save it to read later in my Readability¹⁴⁷ account.

¹⁴⁵. <http://interconnected.org/home/>

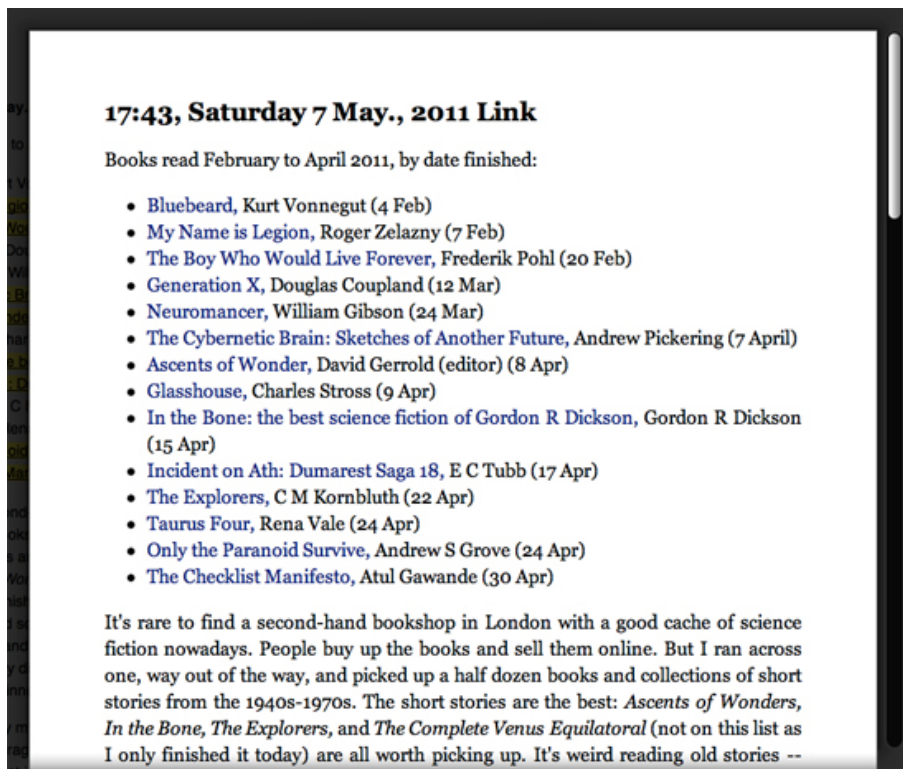
¹⁴⁶. <http://berglondon.com/>

¹⁴⁷. <http://www.readability.com>



As you can see, reading Matt's blog in Readability, instead of on his website, is not a substantially different experience. The colors and typography are different, and Readability includes its own toolbar on the left; but really, nothing here has changed enough to alter Matt's message.

Let's compare one more tool: Safari's Reader, which detects articles and enables visitors to read them in an isolated, attention-friendly overlay.



Again, no major differences here. Just as with Readability, Safari has altered the colors and typography. But because Matt's website is so stark to begin with, the experience is remarkably stable across these different contexts.

But what about an article from a website with a much more developed design? How might my experience of the content change from the original context to Readability and Safari Reader?


2. SMASHING MAGAZINE



For my second example, I took a screenshot of an article I wrote for this website back in May 2010, “Holistic Web Browsing: Trends of the Future¹⁴⁸.” As you can see, Smashing Magazine’s design is relatively simple; but, unlike Matt Webb’s design, it includes many more images: a graphic menu at the top, a logo and, as is common in big publications, advertisements.

Let’s see how this article looks in Readability:

¹⁴⁸. <http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2010/04/10/holistic-web-browsing-4-trends-of-the-future/>

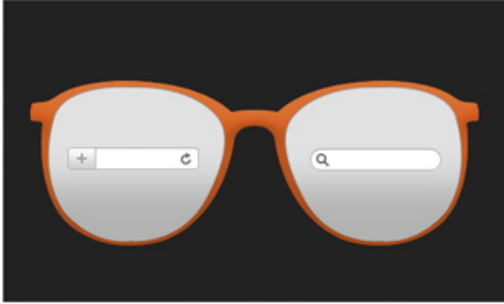
[smashingmagazine.com](#)

Holistic Web Browsing: Trends Of The Future

APRIL 10, 2010 [READ LATER](#)

Advertisement

The future of the Web is everywhere. The future of the Web is not at your desk. It's not necessarily in your pocket, either. It's *everywhere*. With each new technological innovation, we continue to become more and more immersed in the Web, connecting the ever-growing layer of information in the virtual world to the real one around us. But rather than get starry-eyed with utopian wonder about this bright future ahead, we should **soberly anticipate the massive amount of planning and design work** it will require of designers, developers and others.



The gap between technological innovation and its integration in our daily lives is

What's immediately obvious is that Readability isolates the content in the main column and, in doing so, strips out just about everything else: the header, logo, navigation and sidebar content. It also removes the ads that Smashing Magazine runs in the content column at the top of articles, but leaves the "Advertisement" tag.



Safari Reader includes the ad in the content column. Other than that, the experience is very similar.

Other than the fact that both tools effectively un-brand Smashing Magazine's content, there's not a whole lot to complain about here. No essential elements are missing, and because Smashing Magazine's authors know to keep the images in their articles very basic (i.e. image references only), there's little need to worry about losing those aspects of the message that appear in image form.

3. CRAIG MOD

Craig Mod¹⁴⁹ is another interesting person who has been doing a lot of thinking, writing, speaking and designing related to the content experience for some time now. I've chosen his website partly because an article of his is relevant to the discussion, but also because I was curious how his beautiful design would translate to a tool like Readability.

¹⁴⁹. <http://www.craigmod.com>

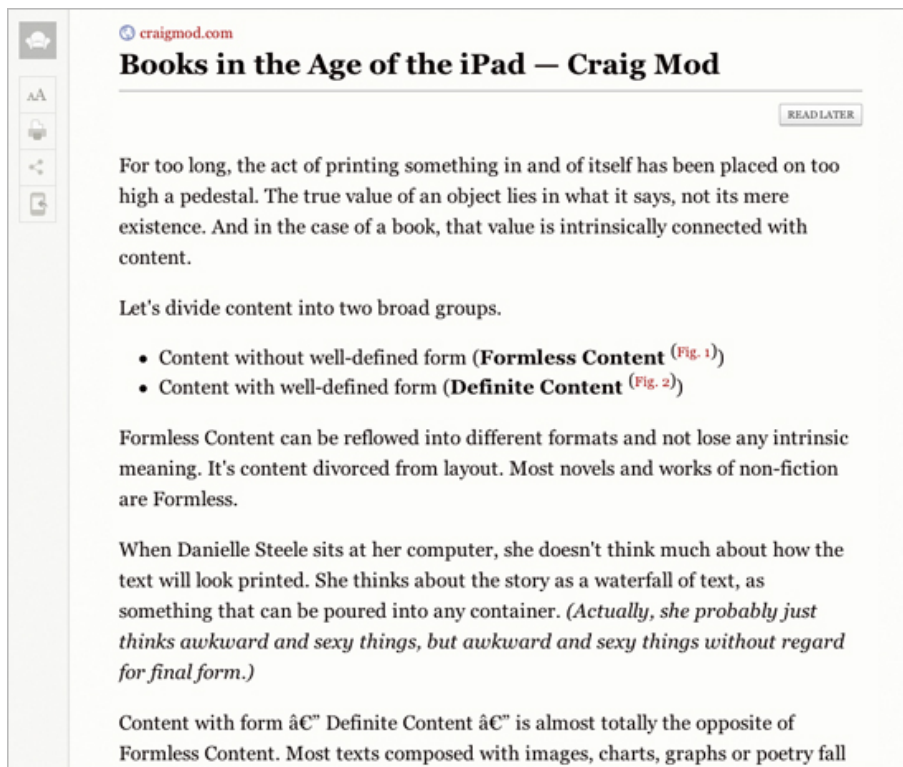


Before I show you this particular article, “Books in the Age of the iPad¹⁵⁰,” in Readability, I want to quickly share a couple of reasons why Craig’s design makes for a great reading experience. First, it has white space. A lot of it. The screenshot above shows only a small portion of the page. Follow the link above to see for yourself; the article has a single column of text and many high-quality images that Craig has arranged to fit seamlessly into both the article and the website. Nothing feels as if it doesn’t belong.

Secondly, the typography — from the large illustrated title at the top to the headings and two-column preamble — contributes to a mood of calm yet earnest thoughtfulness, which I really appreciate as I slowly make my way through Craig’s argument. He uses design to guide me at a very deliberate pace.

I could go on and on. Suffice it to say that Craig knows what he’s doing with his design. And while the website might appear similarly minimal to Matt Webb’s, the language of design is used very differently here. I’m a fan.

150. http://craigmod.com/journal/ipad_and_books/



Above is the same article in Readability. At first glance, it doesn't look too bad. As in the other examples, the typography has changed, as have some of the subtleties of Craig's layout. But then I realized something: Readability excludes the *entire* preamble! Everything from "Print is dying..." to "This is a conversation..." is completely gone. I went back to the original page and saved it again in Readability just to double-check. Same thing. I triple-checked. Same thing. Also, look closely at the last paragraph in the screenshot above. For some reason, Readability doesn't like Craig's em dashes¹⁵¹.

OK, I'll save you the repetition and skip Safari Reader for this example. (It looks very much like the other two examples.)

Seeing Craig's website in Readability was a disappointment. After seeing the other examples, I was prepared to lose his design sensibilities, but I wasn't prepared to lose such a sizeable chunk of content. Clearly, the way Craig has laid out his page's template doesn't jibe with the code that Readability looks for to identify where a page's main content begins and ends, and that's not really anyone's fault.

Readability should not – and could not, really – be expected to adapt to and interpret every conceivable way that a Web page can display content, nor should Craig have anticipated how Readability works when designing his website. It's not about failure so much as about un-

¹⁵¹. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Em_dash

derstanding that communication on the Web is done in a variety of ways.

BUT WAIT! IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT PICKINESS...

Dwelling on the mostly minor differences between how these articles appear may seem overly picky. After all, it's not like you can't read them. But even the minor differences — whether a substitution of typography, a change in color or an omission of imagery — are meaningful to the designers who created the original environments in which these articles exist. In my experience, I've known plenty of developers who take a casual attitude to implementing designs, but I've never met a single designer who doesn't consider even the smallest detail sacrosanct.

There is also an irony here worth noting. Tools like Readability — and I'm focusing on it mainly because it does reading advocacy the best — are very well designed. They speak the designer's language by paying attention to details that usually only those who have worked with typography would consciously recognize. The rest of us just see the page and know that it looks beautiful and feels good to read. Designers recognize in Readability an appreciation of white space, proportion, typography and other essentials that are typically considered luxuries on the Web.

That's why they are so excited about it. Nevertheless, elegant as it may be, Readability substitutes the deliberately unique design of an article with a one-size-fits-all boilerplate aesthetic. While I'm confident in the integrity and best intentions of Readability, I also question the dynamic that it potentially establishes: by adeptly harnessing the seductive power of good design, it attracts the very people who its functionality ultimately undermines.

What to do?

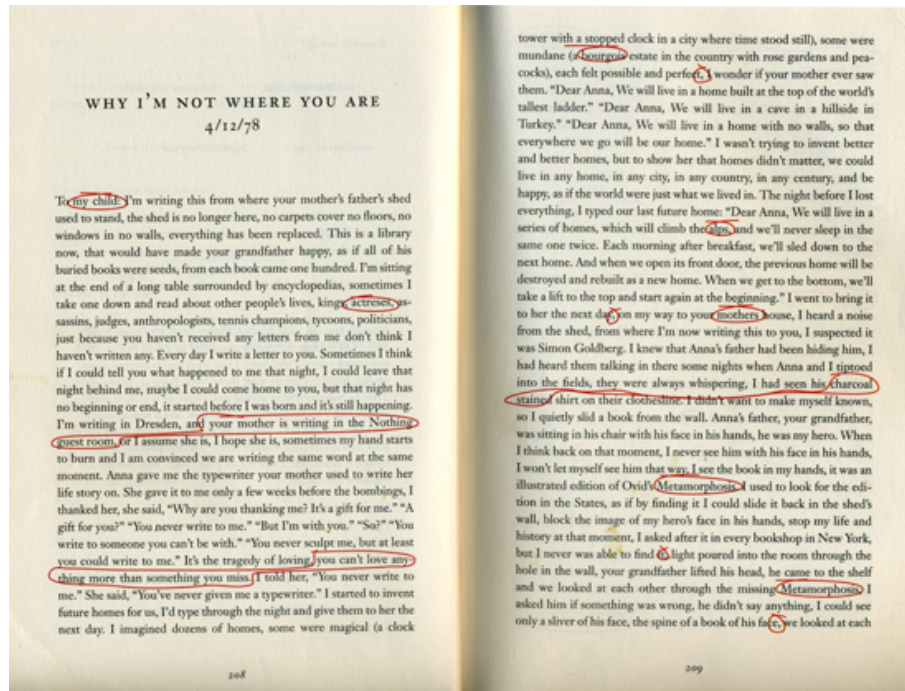
Content And Design In eBooks

Because being able to focus more precisely is the main reason to use reading-advocacy tools, it occurred to me that other content — besides articles written for regular print and Web publications — might present similar difficulties to this system we're building around content portability. I can think of one huge category in particular that is experiencing the growing pains of the analog-to-digital transition: books.

I chose several books to test what I did with the Web pages: view them first in their “native” format (as printed volumes) and then in their “portable” format (as eBooks).

1. EXTREMELY LOUD AND INCREDIBLY CLOSE, BY JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER

In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*¹⁵², Jonathan Safran Foer tells the story of a 9-year-old boy who embarks on a quest to learn more about a mysterious key left behind by his father, a victim of the 9/11 attacks. Foer experiments with image and text a great deal in this book, making for a perfect opportunity to see how the printed page translates to eBook format.



The scan above shows the first two pages of a chapter that “appears” to still be in draft form. I was immediately curious how the eBook would represent the red editorial marks in the text.

¹⁵². http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Extremely_Loud_and_Incredibly_Close

WHY I'M NOT WHERE YOU ARE

4/12/78

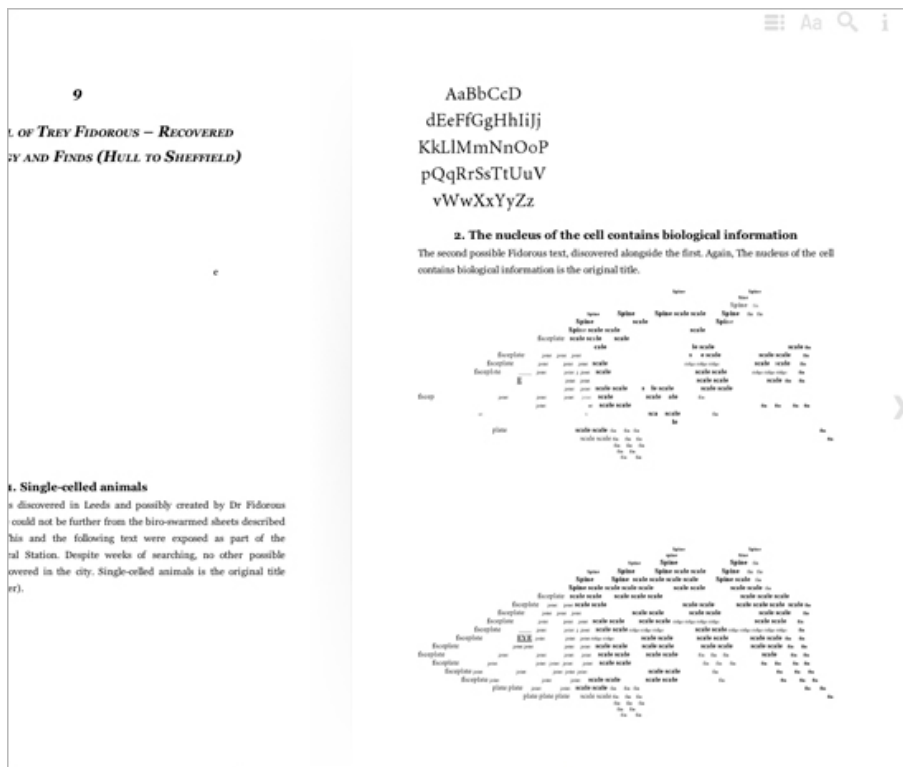
To (Iny chile M'm writing this from where your mother's father's shed used to stand, the shed is no longer here, no carpets cover no floors, no windows in no walls, everything has been replaced. This is a library now, that would have made your grandfather happy, as if all of his buried books were seeds, from each book came one hundred. I'm sitting at the end of a long table surrounded by encyclopedias, sometimes I take one down and read about other people's lives, kings^actresesT^ssassins, judges, anthropologists, tennis champions, tycoons, politicians, just because you haven't received any letters from me don't think I haven't written any. Every day I write a letter to you. Sometimes I think if I could tell you what happened to me that night, I could leave that night behind me, maybe I could come home to you, but that night has no beginning or end, it started before I was born and it's still happening. I'm writing in Dresden, an^l your mother is writing in the Nothing^ Ugliest roomJ5r I assume she is, I hope she is, sometimes my hand starts to burn and I am convinced we are writing the same word at the same moment. Anna gave me the typewriter your mother used to write her life story on. She gave it to me only a few weeks before the bombings, I thanked her, she said, "Why are you thanking me? It's a gift for me." "A gift for you?" "You never write to me." "But I'm with you." "So?" "You write to someone you can't be with." "You never sculpt me, but at least you could write to me." It's the tragedy of lovingjyou can't love~any^ C~thing more than something you miss.jl told her, "You never write to me." She said, "You've never given me a typewriter." I started to invent future homes for us, I'd type through the night and give them to her the next day. I imagined dozens of homes, some were magical (a clock

As you can see, the eBook doesn't handle them very well. There doesn't seem to be much rhyme or reason to the characters that the eBook inserts to represent the edges of the red circles. Sometimes they're parentheses, other times uppercase letter. Either way, the text is pretty difficult to read.

came back out with an envelope. "I almost forgot," he said, his eyes were red, his knuckles were white. I later learned that he survived the bombing and then killed himself. Did your mother tell you that? Does she know it herself? He handed a letter to me. It was from Simon Goldberg. The letter had been posted from Westerbork transit camp in Holland, that's where the Jews from our region were sent, from there they went either to work or to their deaths. "Dear Thomas Schell, it was a pleasure meeting you, however briefly. For reasons that need not be explained, you made a strong impression on me. It is my great hope that our paths, however long and winding, will cross again. Until that day, I

lope in my pocket, where the future home had bee^I heardj^our^ ^grandfather's voicejftstwalked awa^A^ie was still at the dooffI almost^ fno-rji- " Whpp vmir mother found me in the bakery on Broadwav/D <jvanted to tell ... if I'd been able to, we could ha^A lived differently, maybe I'd be there with you now instead of here. Maybe if I had said, <MmU^abyff if I'd saidJ^P m so afraid of losmjN <C^oml?Timg~I love that I refuse to love anything.^' maybe that would have made theVjmpossible possi^Ip^May_b^^uX^couldn't do il^ had buried too much too deeply inside m <And here I am insteadof there-Jfoi sitting in this library, thousands of miles from n^Jife^rJiagan other letr(f know I won't be able to sending matternowjiard ltrj^and^oT

grandfather's voice as I walked away, he was still at the door. "I almost forgot." When your mother found me in the bakery on Broadway, I wanted to tell her everything, maybe if I'd been able to, we could have lived differently, maybe I'd be there with you now instead of here. Maybe if I had said, "I lost a baby," if I'd said, "I'm so afraid of losing something I love that I refuse to love anything," maybe that would have made the impossible possible. Maybe, but I couldn't do it. I had buried too much too deeply inside me. And here I am, instead of there. I'm sitting in this library, thousands of miles from the life, writing another letter.



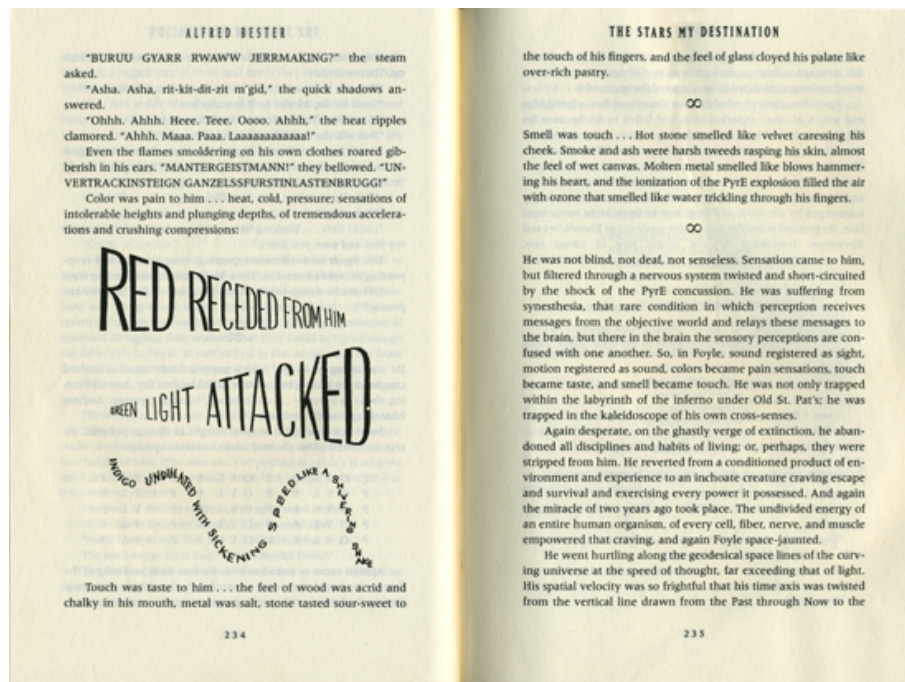
In some ways, the eBook format handles Hall’s fish images better than Foer’s editorial markings. In particular, no junk characters are inserted in the text. But it’s not the greatest representation of what Hall had in mind. In the printed book, the “fossil fish reconstruction” occupies the entire page, with its description underneath. In the eBook version, the image is reduced in size and put on the same page as text that refers to an image not shown, while the “fossil fish reconstruction” footnote is bumped to the next screen.

Obviously, the eBook doesn’t stick with the printed version’s design – nor does it really try to. This makes for a more confusing reading experience.

3-4. THE STARS MY DESTINATION, BY ALFRED BESTER, AND THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE BY MARSHALL MCLUHAN AND QUENTIN FIORE

Neither of these books is available as an eBook in the Kindle, iBooks, or Google Books marketplaces. An EPUB version of *The Stars My Destination* is floating around on the Web, but it is not an authorized version, so I don’t expect that it handles the original design with any reverence.

But both of these books serve as great examples of how the message can depend on more than just traditional text.

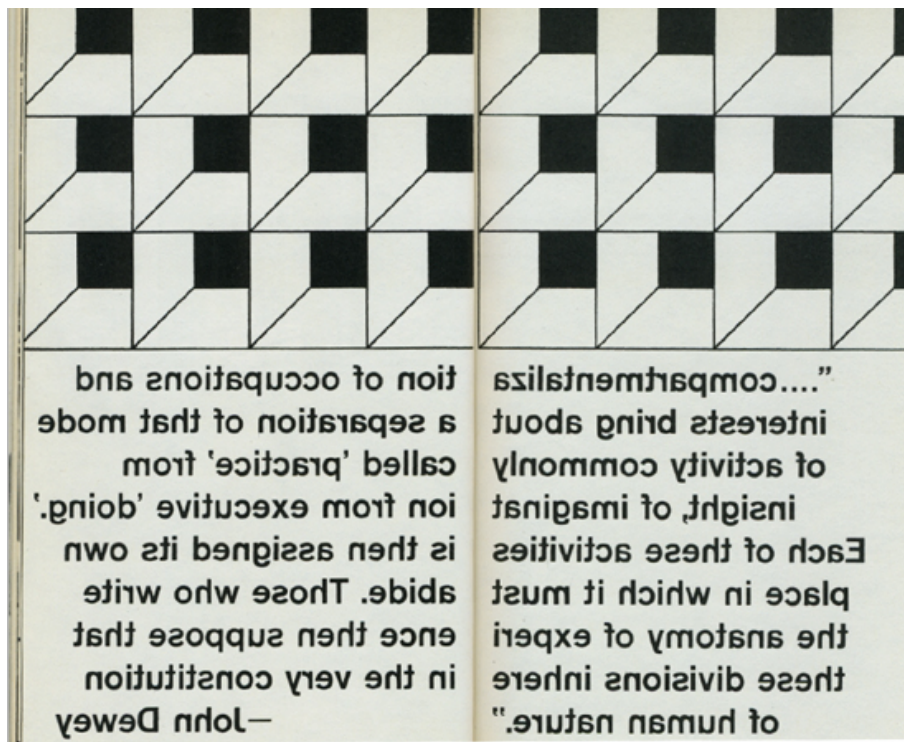


In one of the later chapters of *The Stars My Destination*¹⁵⁵ (shown above), Bester's protagonist experiences an almost psychedelic trip through time and space, which the book captures with an illustration of the words that adds a visual layer to the description, similar to concrete poetry¹⁵⁶.

Something like this could be easily preserved in an eBook by inserting images in the flow of text. But the particular words that Bester illustrates would have to be added as some kind of meta data in order for the text to be fully indexed and searchable.

¹⁵⁵. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Stars_My_Destination

¹⁵⁶. https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Concrete_poetry



Finally, what fusion of image and text is more relevant than *The Medium Is the Message*¹⁵⁷, by Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore? You've probably already guessed that the title of this article is an homage to this book. The scan above (no, I didn't accidentally reverse it — that's actually how it is printed) is just one example of how the pages of the book are all uniquely designed to illustrate McLuhan's text in a striking visual and typographic style. Fiore, by the way, is a graphic designer, not a writer, who reached out to McLuhan to collaborate on the book, specifically to explore how text and image can be combined to affect the consciousness of the reader.

If you're looking for one book that in its very existence emphatically represents the diverse nature of content and pushes its boundaries far beyond text alone, this is it.

AM I JUST BEING PICKY AGAIN?

Maybe so. Like the Web pages that I looked at earlier, none of these eBooks have been adapted poorly enough from print to be *impossible* to read. After all, Google Books gives you the option to read both the scanned pages and the “flowing text” version. So, in any of these situations, you do have alternatives. Of course, depending on your screen’s size, the scanned version might be less than optimal — you might have

157. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Medium_Is_the_Massage

to scroll up and down so much that you'd be too annoyed to bother with it.

Not every book will suffer the analog-to-digital transition. Only those that subtly interweave text and image (and some even that embed illustrations in the text the traditional way) will slip through the cracks of what is, currently, a fairly simple system.

But what these eBooks continue to make clear — reinforcing our argument that emerged from tracing written language from its roots to today's awkward technological transition — is that written communication is complex. More complex than just lines of text. Just because an author uses a variety of means of communication — including text, images, and images created from text — their book should not be disqualified from being made available in digital form, nor be handicapped when it is made available. After all, it's not the book's fault that our current approach to digitization favors works that adhere to a rigid distinction between text and image.

Content And Design In The Future

What these reading-advocacy systems need now is *design* advocacy — an expansion of the templates and tools that, on the one hand, honor the intended substance and meaning of the author's text and that, on the other, don't reduce the reader's experience of content to one of merely processing text.

Coincidentally, GOOD Magazine issued a challenge¹⁵⁸ to its readers: redesign a news website using only images — no text allowed. The magazine doesn't explain where this idea came from, but would it be a stretch to imagine that it signifies a boredom with text and a desire to return to our roots and explore communication with symbols again? Perhaps. I certainly look forward to seeing what GOOD's readers come up with.

In the meantime, we all need to give serious thought to how design and content interact. I think portability is a great idea — see Cameron Koczon's piece on "Orbital Content"¹⁵⁹ for a focused argument on "content liberation" — but it would be a shame to narrow down the designed content experience to only what can be easily translated to third-party reader tools. Imagery, and especially the subtle interplay of imagery and text, deserve to remain active parts of digital expression. Our goal, whether we're designers or writers, should be to make this happen. Maybe the Readability team is already thinking through these

¹⁵⁸. <http://www.good.is/post/project-illustrate-the-news>

¹⁵⁹. <http://www.alistapart.com/articles/orbital-content/>

issues and coming up with new ways to translate content. If so, I'd love to hear about it. 🐼

About The Authors

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Allie Gray Freeland is the PR Director at iAcquire, a global leader in digital brand strategy and marketing services engagement for SEO, reputation management, content marketing, digital public relations, and social media marketing. Allie received her Bachelor's in Journalism from the University of Minnesota. Follow Allie on Twitter¹⁶⁰.

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Colleen is the author of Clout: The Art and Science of Influential Web Content¹⁷¹. As principal of the Atlanta-based consultancy Content Science, Colleen helps everyone from startups to Fortune 500 companies im-

¹⁶⁰. <https://twitter.com/AllieGrayFree>

¹⁶¹. <https://plus.google.com/102318046680468697385?rel=author>

¹⁶². <http://www.straightnorth.com/internet-marketing>

¹⁶³. <http://www.straightnorth.com/web-development>

¹⁶⁴. <https://twitter.com/bradshorr>

¹⁶⁵. <http://www.newfangled.com>

¹⁶⁶. <http://printmag.com/Author/Christopher%20Butler>

¹⁶⁷. <http://www.howinteractivedesign.com/author/christopher-butler>

¹⁶⁸. http://www.newfangled.com/website_topics_for_designers_and_marketers

¹⁶⁹. http://www.newfangled.com/the_strategic_web_designer

¹⁷⁰. <http://www.twitter.com/chrbutler>

¹⁷¹. <http://content-science.com/clout>

prove results from their Web content. When she isn't helping clients, she is blogging about content strategy at [Content Science](#)¹⁷². Twitter: [@leenjones](#)¹⁷³.

Jason Gross

Jason Gross is a freelance Web designer focused on creating clean and user friendly websites. Jason currently lives in Indiana and can be found on Twitter as [@JasonAGross](#)¹⁷⁴ or on the Web at his [personal blog](#)¹⁷⁵ and [portfolio](#).

Rian van der Merwe

Rian is passionate about designing and building software that people love to use. After spending several years working in Silicon Valley, he is currently Director of User Experience at consultancy [Flow Interactive](#)¹⁷⁶ in South Africa. He also [blogs](#)¹⁷⁷ and [tweets](#)¹⁷⁸ regularly about User Experience and Product Management.

Robert Mills

Robert Mills is Studio Manager at Bluegg¹⁷⁹ and author of *Designing the Invisible*¹⁸⁰ from Five Simple Steps. As a journalism graduate and former BBC Audience Researcher he likes words and data, but mainly words. In the day job Rob shares design decisions with clients and explains the rationale behind them. Aside from the general tasks needed to keep a studio ticking over he's also chief proof reader and content ambassador for internal work and client work. He has also written for .Net Magazine, Think Vitamin and 24 Ways. He will write for coffee or Monster Munch but never for raisins or yoghurts with bits in. Twitter: [@Robert-Mills](#)¹⁸¹.

¹⁷². <http://content-science.com/expertise/content-insights/contributor/colleen-jones/p/1>

¹⁷³. <https://twitter.com/leenjones>

¹⁷⁴. <https://twitter.com/JasonAGross>

¹⁷⁵. <http://www.jasonagross.com>

¹⁷⁶. <http://www.userexperience.co.za/>

¹⁷⁷. <http://www.elezea.com/>

¹⁷⁸. <http://twitter.com/rianvdm>

¹⁷⁹. <http://www.bluegg.co.uk/>

¹⁸⁰. <http://www.fivesimplesteps.com/products/a-practical-guide-to-designing-the-invisible>

¹⁸¹. <https://twitter.com/RobertMills>

Sarah Bauer

As content strategist and industry blogger at Navigator Multimedia, Sarah Bauer foresees an exciting gold rush of writing opportunities for herself and others online. Currently working on an e-book aimed at helping small businesses get a start online, Sarah also enjoys writing music reviews and seeing as much live sound as possible while living in Vancouver. She blogs for Navigator [here](#)¹⁸² and wants to get more stuff over [here](#)¹⁸³.

¹⁸². <http://www.kelownawebdesigns.com>

¹⁸³. <http://straight.com/article-475781/vancouver/james-blake-lays-groundwork-new-sound-vancouvers-commodore-ballroom>

About Smashing Magazine

Smashing Magazine¹⁸⁴ is an online magazine dedicated to Web designers and developers worldwide. Its rigorous quality control and thorough editorial work has gathered a devoted community exceeding half a million subscribers, followers and fans. Each and every published article is carefully prepared, edited, reviewed and curated according to the high quality standards set in Smashing Magazine's own publishing policy¹⁸⁵.

Smashing Magazine publishes articles on a daily basis with topics ranging from business, visual design, typography, front-end as well as back-end development, all the way to usability and user experience design. The magazine is — and always has been — a professional and independent online publication neither controlled nor influenced by any third parties, delivering content in the best interest of its readers. These guidelines are continually revised and updated to assure that the quality of the published content is never compromised.

About Smashing Media GmbH

Smashing Media GmbH¹⁸⁶ is one of the world's leading online publishing companies in the field of Web design. Founded in 2009 by Sven Lennartz and Vitaly Friedman, the company's headquarters is situated in southern Germany, in the sunny city of Freiburg im Breisgau. Smashing Media's lead publication, Smashing Magazine, has gained worldwide attention since its emergence back in 2006, and is supported by the vast, global Smashing community and readership. Smashing Magazine had proven to be a trustworthy online source containing high quality articles on progressive design and coding techniques as well as recent developments in the Web design industry.

¹⁸⁴. <http://www.smashingmagazine.com>

¹⁸⁵. <http://www.smashingmagazine.com/publishing-policy/>

¹⁸⁶. <http://www.smashing-media.com>