

Create awesome content

Simple content strategy, writing and collaboration advice.

By Cheri Hanson



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If all else fails, I drink half a bottle of rum and play a Handel oratorio on the gramophone.

– copywriter and ad guru **David Ogilvy**
(1911-1999)

Introduction

Content is an amazing business tool. It's your agent, your ambassador, your best friend and your humble, tireless spokesperson. Content draws people in with a quiet voice and a compelling tale, instead of barking commands like a drill sergeant.

Creating content means telling your story in a format that your audience will enjoy. You don't need an MBA to do it well, but you might need a degree in business jargon to cut through all the crazy language out there:

"The repeatable, SEO-driven methodology scales to match our content lifecycle."

"It's a multi-platform outreach campaign driven by viral social engagement."

"Consumer interaction goals align with comprehensive content governance buy-in."

Huh?

So confusing – and so unnecessary. For many people, content is also a major business hurdle that generates more questions than answers. For example: who will create and care for the content? What formats should I use? How do I know if it's any good?

If you're not feeling overwhelmed, then you weren't paying attention. There are hundreds of experts and guides ready to teach you about content strategy and execution. Some are extremely smart and helpful. Others? Not so much.

This book is all about simplicity. It's designed to help you relax, make clear decisions and create amazing content – no matter what you're trying to accomplish. It's not brain surgery, and it should actually be fun.

I stumbled into content development by accident. I'm a writer and a journalist who has published hundreds of newspaper and magazine stories on everything from auto repair scandals to pine beetles. I've also co-authored three non-fiction books.

About 12 years ago, I was referred to work with a company that needed some extra marketing materials. I knew nothing about their products – or even their field of business. Literally nothing. But, I used my journalism skills to ask the right questions and find the story lurking in the technical jargon.

I discovered that I love following the rabbit trail of story, regardless of the subject, format or company. I still write for newspapers and magazines, but I also work as a freelance copywriter for clients ranging from software giants to outdoor retailers to artists and high-tech start-ups.

Just to be clear, copywriting has nothing to do with patents or legal protection (that's copyrighting) and everything to do with storytelling. It's what Peggy Olson does on the TV series, *Mad Men*. And that brings me to the point of this personal history. Whether it's a

newspaper article, a website, blog post, video, or newsletter, there's one golden rule to follow at all costs:

Great content tells true stories that engage people's emotions

If everything you create can pass this litmus test, you're all set. You've got awesome content. And getting there isn't as tough as it sounds.

One more thing, in case you're still feeling panicked.

Engaging people's emotions doesn't necessarily mean making them cry, like a weepy Hallmark commercial. Compelling content might inspire feelings of relief, surprise, clarity, anger or excitement. If it's an authentic emotion, it's fair game.

After all, what's the point of business – of delivering a product, service or experience – if you're not going to affect people's lives? I know, it's a lofty ideal, but that's what I strive for in every project (even if I don't always succeed). It's also what makes me good at my job.

It's time to create content that reveals who you are and what you have to offer.

Let's get started.

What is
content?

I'm going to skip the marketing definitions and say this as clearly as possible:

Content is anything you produce and present to your audience in order to communicate something.

Your audience might be personal or professional, and the message can be as private as a hand-written card or as public as a Times Square billboard. Content also lives in every format and channel you can imagine, plus everything that's yet to emerge from Silicon Valley. Here are some of the most common forms to date:

- Website copy (writing), taglines and pages
- Email and print newsletters
- Handouts, brochures, mailers, letters, cards, posters
- Video, audio podcasts and recordings, photographs,
- Blogs and online journals / scrapbooks
- Writing and posts on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest and LinkedIn
- Books (print and digital)
- Whitepapers, case studies and articles
- Catalogues, magazines, guidebooks (print and digital)

I'm sure this list is missing something, but you get the point. And while content definitely includes visual communications (video, photo, illustrations, etc.), I'm a writer, and I'm going to focus on the written word.

We'll talk a little about how writing intersects with design and photography, but from now on when I use the word "content," you can assume we're talking primarily about writing.

Why content
matters

Content has always been important. People who can clearly and effectively communicate their ideas have a serious market advantage – whether you’re selling shoes or trying to attract blood donors.

As you know, the Internet quickly expanded our options for creating and sharing content. Now, watching a video doesn’t require a film projector or a VHS tape. You can send a digital newsletter to 50,000 subscribers using a smart phone app. And obviously, websites have become more relevant than the Yellow Pages. Technology will continue to evolve, but content endures. Content will always be essential.

Today’s digital world requires everyone to tell their story and connect with clients or customers through a combination of different formats – a content portfolio, of sorts. For example:

Jewelry designer: website + Facebook page + online catalogue + Twitter account

Investment firm: website + e-newsletter + print brochure

Non-profit food co-op: website + blog + posters + online video + Instagram feed

Using content to drive business means sharing stories and information with the people you want to reach. Content strategy is the process of choosing the right way to deliver your message, picking the formats best suited to accomplish your goals, and creating a plan to create and distribute your content.

Fighting through the clutter

To create awesome content, stop thinking about what it's going to do for you. Instead, focus on what it can do for your audience. We're all drowning in information. Make your content useful and provide something real for your customers, clients and supporters. Helpful content can deliver:

- information
- new ideas and strategies
- inspiration and excitement
- clarification
- help, guidance or instruction
- step-by-step techniques
- entertainment, fun or diversion
- awareness
- reassurance
- expertise
- community and connection

When you provide something valuable, people will respond to your content. You're pulling them in with that quiet, compelling voice that we all love to hear.

Expert positioning

Great content isn't just advertising. Your content should also express your point of view. It's a way to share how you see the world, or at the very least, the field in which you work or play. It makes your audience feel more connected to you. They learn something about who you are as an individual, or a company, and why they should choose to engage with you.

That's also why it's essential to ensure your content is aligned with your values. That sounds lofty, but it doesn't have to be. I'm not referring to values in the moral sense. Instead, I'm talking about the ideas and principles that guide you – things like adventure, creativity, reliability, trust, or a down-to-earth way of working. Your content might actually outline these beliefs, but using content to demonstrate your values, rather than describing them, is even better.

Smart content can also position you as an expert or a leader in your field. An artist who shares news about grants and funding opportunities is serving her creative community, while gathering a wider audience for her paintings. A financial services company that provides a

monthly Q&A newsletter shows respect for the people who invest their hard-earned money with its managers. The opportunities are endless. Content that provides value above and beyond mere advertising is always better received than straight-up self-promotion.

Content strategy

According to the Oracle that is Wikipedia:

“Content strategy refers to the planning, development, and management of informational content – written or in other media.”

Pretty straightforward. Unfortunately, the words “content strategy” can mean something different to everyone. In large companies, content strategy can involve data storage and usage rules designed to control privacy and access to information. It’s critical in places (like a hospital) where content needs to be well organized, filed with consistent naming practices, and distributed to the right people at the right time. In a large organization with a complex digital environment, managing content can be a massive and highly technical task.

But that’s not what I’m talking about.

If you’re a typical small business, contractor or freelancer, content strategy is simple. It means deciding which content formats and channels will build the strongest connections with your audience. It means harnessing your strengths (such as writing, speaking or sharing ideas visually), or hiring people who can fill in the gaps.

Determine what you want the content to accomplish, such as provoking discussion or encouraging customer

inquiries. Choose from all the options and make a plan to follow through.

Content takes time

I will probably mention this *ad nauseum* in the following pages, but it's critical to remember that great content takes time. A very unscientific survey of my creative peers confirmed that their clients are always surprised by the amount of time required to plan, create, edit and especially, to maintain, quality digital and physical content.

I emphasize the time commitment not to discourage you, but instead, to encourage you to take this process seriously, and to know that you're not alone. Everyone has to work at it, and even content that feels effortless (the best kind) has required serious behind-the-scenes labour. You are not wasting your time. This work will pay real dividends.

Content influences technology

Most people understand that websites and online projects require at least basic upfront planning. The most successful ones are extremely well considered and professionally executed, but that's another book entirely (in fact, it's called [Be Awesome at Online Business](#) by

my friend, Paul Jarvis). What continues to baffle me, though, is how content is often left waiting in the field, like the kid picked last for a baseball team. Many clients assume that once a website, app or online venture is built, it's simply a matter of stuffing in the content. Unfortunately, it's not always that easy.

Will your site have a blog? Does it need the capacity to provide news or a social media feed? Who will do the content updates and perform ongoing maintenance?

There are many content-related questions to answer, which is why content – and content strategy – should be considered right from the outset. It can affect everything from design to programming to functionality and tone. Develop your technology, platforms and content in tandem and you'll be much happier with the final results.

Simple content strategy

After people read, watch or interact with my content, I want them to:

[Fill in the blanks with actions, such as “call me for an estimate,” “order my product” or “subscribe to my newsletter.”]

1.

2.

3.

The content should make my audience feel:

[e.g. “excited, relieved, confident, curious, eager to hire me, etc.”]

1.

2.

My audience needs:

[Go beyond what you provide (i.e. web design). List what your content will deliver that people are missing, such as “an accessible way to think about commissioning art,” or “practical advice that eliminates confusion.”]

1.

2.

3.

I am most comfortable expressing myself through:

[Be specific. Do you excel at standard written formats, such as articles or case studies, or off-the-cuff blog posts and checklists? If you like to speak, do you like addressing crowds or do you prefer a quiet room and an audio recorder?]

1.

2.

3.

My favourite social media platforms (to date) are:

[What do you use and enjoy? Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Google+, etc.]

1.

2.

I am willing / able to create and release content on the following basis (e.g. daily, weekly, monthly):

[Define your editorial schedule – and be honest with yourself. If

you're only willing to create and maintain a kick-ass website and use Twitter, that's fine. Just be prepared to follow through and do your best with the formats you choose. You need to carve out extra time from your current schedule to do it well – and this always takes longer than you expect.]

In order to create / distribute / edit / update my content, I will need help with:

[Everyone has talents that translate into awesome content – and almost everyone needs help with at least one part of their plan.]

The help I need will take approximately __ hours / days / each month.

[Use your best estimate – then double it.]

Pull it together

Your answers to the eight questions in worksheet #1 create the skeleton of a personalized content strategy. Here's a sample:

As a copywriter-for-hire, my own content should make my audience feel relieved and excited knowing that I can help bring their stories to life.

I love writing and I'm also visually oriented. I like Instagram and Twitter, but I want to keep my Facebook account private. I'm willing to update my social media accounts on a limited daily basis (1-3 posts per day, max) and I can write about one blog post per week.

I need help with web design and site maintenance, and I'm thinking about creating a newsletter, so I'll need someone to design it and help develop the email delivery systems. I'm guessing this will take about 5-10 hours a month, once the initial templates are finished.

Sample strategy at a glance

Personal collateral + platforms:

Website / blog / newsletter

Social media:

Twitter and Instagram

Schedule:

Daily social updates, weekly blog posts, monthly newsletter

Help required:

5-10 hours / month from a web designer and/or digital media expert

Next, transform this shorthand into a step-by-step, scheduled plan. Break down the steps you need to put everything into place and set launch targets, plus an ongoing maintenance plan. Once you've established your platform and format preferences, keep yourself on track by continually referring back to these three audience-focused questions:

1. What do I want people to feel when they interact with my content?
2. What do I want them to do after engaging with my content?
3. What is my audience missing that I can provide with my content?

About the
author



Cheri Hanson is a writer, journalist and content strategist. She can pull a good story from even the most convoluted rat maze – and she’s been working her magic for clients and editors since 1997. Her first paid freelance story uncovered *Playboy* recruiters on university campuses.

Since then, she’s co-authored three non-fiction books and written hundreds of magazine and newspaper stories. Cheri also writes advertising copy and marketing materials for good people and companies.

She's a rusty-but-classically-trained violinist and an extroverted observer with an introvert's dream job. Her obsessions include early-80s New Wave, goats, cheese (and goat cheese), smart coming-of-age films, espresso, Joan Didion, Scandinavia, ESP (but not ESPN) and Portuguese wine.

Originally from Calgary, Cheri lives in Vancouver with her husband, Mark.

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