What is content strategy?

When you look at a website or use an app, you're interacting with content. Content is the information conveyed in copy, navigation and the visual design of digital experiences. Content strategy is the concerted effort to present that information in meaningful, useful and relevant contexts within the user experience. Content strategy is a discipline in many creative agencies and mid to large scale companies. This content strategist role combines elements of information architecture and copywriting, along with editorial method. But even if you're not called a content strategist, you'll use content strategy in creating websites and digital experiences.

Understanding content strategy will allow you to deliver the right information at the right time and in the right place. Information architecture and content strategy really go hand in hand. Specialists in each discipline often work closely together in a user experience team. In smaller engagements, one person may combine the expertise of these two disciplines into a single role. Content strategy places information in meaningful contexts. That way when users have a website or other digital experience, need information, they'll find it when and where it's needed.

Evolution of content strategy

As a term, Content Strategy didn't gain prominence until the rise of the Web in the 1990s. And to many people, it's still entirely new. But since we began communicating, it's always been in there. It's in our nature to ponder the best way to communicate information. In Paleolithic times, cave walls were sometimes used to record stories. While painters painted, the storytelling that dictated the selection and arrangement of figures was a sort of prehistoric content strategy. Fast forward to the 15th century. Johannes Gutenberg's printing press employed movable type to rapidly accelerate the spread of the written word.

The urge to broaden distribution of printed materials to the masses was a form of content strategy. Mail order catalogs enabled 19th century farmers to shop from faraway urban stores. The marketing of merchandise and the arrangement of goods by department exhibited content strategy. The 1950s in America introduced a golden age of advertising. Copywriters, art directors, and other creatives worked together to sell dreams as well as products. Their world was art and copy, but their collaboration included content strategy.

In the 1970s, Richard Saul Wurman coined the term Information Architecture. To describe the logical approach to ordering the waves of information thrust at us continually. It's in the dot com boom of the 1990s that the term content strategy emerged to emphasize the critical junction. Where copy, architecture, design, and data collide. Content strategy may be a relative newcomer, but its roots extend back centuries. The tradition of improving how we communicate, continues today.

Exploring the future of content strategy

As a disciplined, content strategy blossomed in the dot com era, information access continues to change in ways we couldn't even imagine in the 1990's. Today, content strategy is increasingly critical in ensuring users can access the right information, at the right time, and in the right place regardless of how they're accessing it. By 2012, approximately 20% of all web traffic in North American and 10% globally came via mobile devices. With mobile access continuing to spread, many experts predict that mobile web traffic will surpass desktop web traffic within the next couple of years.

And with mobile access to content, it's not just browers we have to consider. There are hunderds of thousands of apps on multiple platforms. What does this mean? There can no longer be an assumption that content designed for a website will stay on that website. It may eventually be used in an app or other digital experience. When building content strategy, we need to plan for content that can adapt to responsive designs on different platforms. Content strategy is more important now than ever before, because it can enable content to be created once, and used in many channels.

As user experiences continue to evolve, we don't know how content will be used down the line. The best we can do, is insure content is flexible, and comprehensible, in any context.

Setting the right expectations

Content strategy is a relatively new discipline, so you may need to lobby for its inclusion in projects. The best starting point is setting proper expectations. You can do this by helping stakeholders understand how content strategy fits in the user experience project. A typical project includes four major phases, discover, design, develop, and deploy. The discover phase covers research, evaluation, and generation of ideas. The design phase yields the interactions and visual aesthetic that shape the experience. That experience is built, tested, and refined in the develop phase.

Finally, the newer, redesigned experience launches in the deploy phase. Where does content strategy fit in? At every step along the way. In the discover phase, the content audit categorization, gap analysis, stakeholder interviews, and personas are integral to building requirements and defining the project. The design phase features development of the style guide and content matrix, plus close collaboration on wire frames. In the develop phase, copy decks are written, reviewed, and approved, and the style guide is refined and distributed.

And in the deploy phase, content is evaluated within the experience, and updated as needed after launch. There's one important caveat when setting expectations. Don't promise perfect content. That's simply not a realistic goal. But you can promise close collaboration with the project team and carefully constructed content. That's just the type of achievable and meaningful expectation you'll want to set. And it shows stakeholders why content strategy deserves its place in user experience projects.

Understanding tone and voice

Each of us has a voice. This is what mine sounds like. It changes somewhat, depending on the time of day, how much I've been talking, how I'm feeling, and various other factors. But it's generally recognizable as my voice. Websites and other content resources also have a voice. That voice should be consistent and generally recognizable regardless of the context in which it's encountered. How can we define a voice? Well, it's really an expression of the brand it represents, and that expression is often defined through adjectives. For a fashion retailer, the voice might be smart, stylish, aspirational and sophisticated.

For a sports news resource, the voice might be upbeat, energetic, edgy and competitive. Looking at an existing site, you can gauge its current voice pretty quickly by identifying keywords. On this olive oil producers home page, we see phrases like, thank you for taking the time out of your busy day, we hope you'll find, and love to get feedback. The voice is meek, needy, and passive. There's nothing really promoting the company or confidently marketing its olive oil product. The home page of this art academy presents an entirely different voice. Here, we see words and phrases like passionate, join us, excited, and don't forget.

The site's voice is impassioned, assured, energetic, and conversational. Good content strategy enables you to define the voice you want, and develop the content to reinforce it. Tone goes hand in hand with voice, whereas voice is consistent and generally recognizable, tone is dependent upon context. The tone of my voice can vary wildly. If I'm angry or confused or really happy, that's reflected in the tone as well. Content functions similarly. Tone depends upon context. Think of a corporate website where the voice is authoritative, cutting-edge, slightly boastful and completely determined.

The home page may reflect a salesy tone that matches the page's marketing objective. The about us section, on the other hand, changes tone completely. Here it's restrained, factual, and slighly clinical. That's because it's sharing the nuts and bolts that bind the company together. The tone reflects that intent. Defining the voice and tone you want puts you in control of how your brand is communicated and perceived.

Shaping the tone

Whereas Voice is generally consistent across a digital experience, Tone varies depending upon the context in which content is discovered. Three main considerations go into setting the tone. Audience profile, subject matter, and desired outcomes. An audience profile describes that characteristics common to a group. Focus on those characteristics that make your audience unique. What characteristics truly define this audience and draw it to your experience. If you have detailed demographic data that describes your audience, such as age, education level, and postal codes, then that's perfect.

Use your data to build your audience profile. For most experiences however there are likely won't be easily accessible in detailed data. I's okay to infer characteristics of your audience but don't make wild guesses. Stick with reasonable inferences that are fairly representative of your audience. Profiles bases on inferred audience characteristics are called Personas. Personas are composite sketches that reflect real world behaviors, attributes, and attitudes. For a detailed look at personas, see the movie Developing Personas later in this course.

Whether drawn from real world data or personas, audience profiles help you understand who your audience is and what information it needs. So that was the first consideration when working with tone, audience profiles. The second consideration is the Subject Matter. What is it you're trying to communicate with this content? The third consideration is Desired Outcomes. What is it you hope the audience will do with this content? Subject matter and desired outcomes will differ across content elements, and these differences provide context. Let's take a look at this olive oil producer's website. We can infer the audience is researching olive oil. Individuals may be foodies looking for new ingredients or gift givers looking for something unique.

Let's identify the subject matter and desired outcomes that drive the context for each main section of the site. The Home page introduces the olive oils. It should entice the user to click into the site, beyond the home page. About, provides company information should help the audience better understand it's history and tradition. Process explains how the olive oils are made. It should encourage the audience to interact with the available virtual tour. Shop presents each olive oil product individually, and should encourage purchase of the oils on the website or at a local store.

Now that we know the audience profile as well as the subject matter and desired outcomes for content elements, we can shape content tone. While voice is consistent, tone changes to support different contexts.

Defining style

Voice and Tone are the building blocks of content style. To help shape that style, it's important to establish your voice, and tone. You may be building a new experience or reshaping an old one. If you're starting from scratch, the voice is yours to create. Ask yourself, or your client, what defines your brand. Make a list of brand attributes, these will help shape your style, so will your audience. Make a list of key characteristics. You need to know who you're communicating with in order to meet their needs. Now, you can brainstorm a starter set of voice adjectives that reflect both your brand and your audience.

These adjectives will evolve into your content voice. It can also be helpful to list what the voice isn't. Defining voice in is, isn't pairs, provides additional examples that help content creators express a common voice. Say you're building a site for college students to share videos. You know your Brand is original, curious, and funny. And your Audience is young, social, and daring. You also know that your Brand isn't passe, dull, or boring.

Use these descriptions to guide content development. Periodically check whether the content you are creating matches the voice adjectives you started with. If it hasn't and you feel the content satisfies both brand and audience needs, then you'll need to revise your adjectives. For the video sharing site, it turns out the content is better described as adventurous, rather than funny. Now, you have an emerging voice that works well with both your brand and your audience. If you're reworking an existing source, the voice is already there somewhere.

It's likely muddled, buried, or plain confusing. You still need to define your brand and audience and create a set of voice adjectives. Instead of creating content from scratch, you're evaluating whether the current content matches the adjectives. If it doesn't, then you'll need to rework it to reflect the voice, or you may need to update the voice adjectives to match the content. Once you've established your voice, you can shape the tone to match different contexts. You shape the tone by examining your audience profile, subject matter, and desired outcomes. The audience profile is characteristics that make your audience unique and draws it to your experience.

Subject matter is what you are trying to communicate. Desired outcomes are what you hope the audience does with he content. Let's look at shaping tone for a computer retailers website. Our audience is interested in technology or just needs a computer. The subject matter is computers and the desired out is a completed purchase. The contents tone should be informative with a broad range of product information that gets more technical the deeper the customer digs. It should be confident, projecting that this retailer's computers present the customer's best choices. And it should entice the customer to enter, and complete the purchase cycle. Together, voice, and tone comprise content style. What you should document in a style guide.

For a detailed look at that process, see Creating Style Guides, later in this course. For now, remember that content style, is the embodiment of voice, and tone.

Content auditing

If you're working with existing content, the best place to start is with a Content Audit. Even if you're starting from scratch, you can use it as a template for content creation during the development planning stage. A Content Audit is a spreadsheet like the one you see here. Each row lists a content element, with columns capturing your objective and subjective analysis of each item. Objective analysis collects facts about content. You'll want to use the spreadsheet columns to list such basics as what the item is titled. What it's linked to.

When it was created. And who's responsible for maintaining it. For more objective criteria, see the Content Audit in this course's exercise files. If server analytics data is available, it's also helpful to include how frequently the item is accessed. How usage has trended in common search terms used to find it. Subjective analysis is an opinion-based assessment of content quality. In other words, is it still good and still useful? Subjectivity is, well, subjective. But you can structure this spreadsheet columns as a checklist to guide your analysis.

Your checklist might include, is the content relevant? Does it use the proper voice, tone and style? Is it clear and easy to understand? Is it up to date? You'll find more subjective criteria examples in the Content Audit exercise file. If you're starting your project from scratch, use the Content Audit spreadsheet to document content planned for creation. Assign as much detail in the audit as you possibly can even if you're making educated guesses. The goal is to build a checklist that is useful for your project and for gauging your contents ability to provide the right information, at the right time and in the right place.

Categorizing

Categorizing helps us organize the information collected in the Content Audit. When we categorize things, we place similar items into groups. When conducting a content audit, we might categorize the content by asset type. HTML, text, video, these are just a few examples. Essentially, what we're doing is finding patterns and defining context. Some patterns and contexts may already be defined due to existing navigation, metadata, or other organizational aids. But the challenge here is to not rely solely on pre-existing categorization. You want to apply your expertise and judgment to categorize content creatively.

And logically independent of any preexisting arrangements. Let's give it a try. Take a look at these common items you'd find in a grocery store, and think of how you would categorize them. Chances are, you would categorize them as your grocery store does in the produce section. One category is fruits, another vegetables. But that's because we're using preconceived catgories to arrange the items. How else could we do it if categorizing creatively? By color, by shape, by size. Chances are, you won't be dealing with fruits and vegetables as content. But you can take a similar approach when categorizing what you do have. If you're starting from scratch, you can still categorize planned content to find patterns and tentative groupings.

Be creative and brainstorm different ways to categorize content. Document categorization ideas in your Content Audit spreadsheet. While you may not use every category you think of, you'll want to capture them all for future reference. When you use your creativity, you're not just relying on pre-existing categories. Instead, you're finding new patterns that bring different content elements together.

Identifying gaps

Once you have your content audited and categorized, it's time for gap analysis. Gaps point to information that's missing from original content and would be useful for users. Some gaps will be easily identifiable, based on what you're trying to communicate and the content you already have. Say you hope to leverage interactive elements to deliver an engaging experience. When you complete your audit and categorization, you notice the interactive elements are distributed unevenly. Take this olive oil producers website. The homepage has a flavor of the month game.

The process section has an interactive tour that incorporates videos and photos. But the about us section is missing interactivity. That's a gap. But we can identify an opportunity to introduce interaction. The company history could be developed into a media rich, interactive timeline, instead of being delivered in plain text. Other gaps will be identified through your content audit. You may identify that some assets are outdated and should be replaced. You may also identify that some products have an incomplete array of supporting information.

These are gaps that need to be addressed. For now, list them as gaps in your audit. When you get to content development, you'll know to add new content to fill the gaps. If you're starting from scratch, you can still use gap analysis to identify holes in your content plans. Then you can prioritize content development resources where they're needed the most. That's what gap analysis does. It provides you the opportunity to identify and fill holes in existing content.

Defining your audience

If you build and deliver content, but there's no one around to consume it, does it communicate anything? Audiences don't just spontaneously appear, they're drawn to experiences that are relevant, meaningful and useful. To deliver these types of experiences consistently, you need to get to know your audience. Build a profile of key characteristics that are common to members of your audience. Focus on what makes your audience unique, and what connects it to your experience. If you're working with existing content, you can use server logs to learn about your audience. What search terms did they use to find you? Where are they located? And what days and times does the audience peak? What social networks are users actively involved in.

And what profile data is available from those social networks. If you don't have access to detailed data, or if you're starting from scratch, that's okay. You can infer characteristics of your audience based on what you know about your brand and content. Stick with reasonable inferences that are fairly representative of your audience. Say you're working on content strategy for a museum. We can make some pretty solid inferences about your core audience. They appreciate the arts, are likely considering a visit, and are interested in current exhibits and upcoming events. Once you know who your audience is and what they're looking for in the experience, you can use that information to build content that better meets their needs.

While it might work for an Iowa baseball field. For most digital experiences, it's not true that, if you build it, they will come. You have to draw audiences in, keep them interested. And bring them back with your content. And to do that, you have to know your audience.

Developing personas

There's no single audience description that can apply to every user. Instead, we can categorize users into generalized audience types. To keep these audience types front of mind throughout content development, we can give them descriptions and names. We call these Personas. Personas are composite sketches that reflect real world behaviors, attributes and attitudes. They reflect the Pareto Principle also known as the 80, 20 role. 80% of your business comes from 20% of your customers. So, while personas can't possible encompass your full audience base. They're designed to capture the essence of those who matter the most in determining your success.

To develop your audience personas, you'll start by defining your audience.

Identify key characteristics that are common to users, and make your audience unique. Next, map audience interests to brand attributes. What draws and connects the audience to your experience. Then, match audience interests to your subject matter. What will attract, inform, and keep them? Finally, use these characteristics to tell a story that brings each persona to life. To make personas seem more like real people, and less like composite sketches.

Assign them names and personal details. That also makes them easier to reference with colleagues. Let's take a look at three key personas for a museum based in Southern California. First up is Susan. She's in her late 50s and lives in Santa Barbara, just a few miles from the museum. She's the mother of two adult children. While she has a degree in art, she owns a small marketing firm but has cut back to being in the office just three days a week. With her free time, she'd like to get better acquainted with area museum collections.

A second persona is Jenna. She's a teenager who lives in the Los Angeles area. She's currently taking an art history class. Her teacher recently showed the class a painting by Paul Shellington and mentioned this museum would soon be exhibiting Shellington's work. Jenna thinks maybe he would make a good subject for her end of semester project. Don is our third and final persona. He's in his early 70s and lives in Michigan, over 2000 miles away from the museum. But his daughter and grandchildren live near the museum. He's planning to visit soon and would like to plan some local activities.

So, he stays out of their way during the school days. Each persona represents a different core audience type. Susan represents a key persona for the broad website. She's based locally, and wants to learn more about the museum, and both it's permanent and rotating exhibits. Jenna is looking for information on a specific artist, and his upcoming exhibition. She may visit the museum in person, and see more than just Shellington's collection. But her interests are primarily geared toward that one artist's work. Don is an out of towner looking for something to do when he visits.

He's likely to need information on planning his visit to the museum. And he also may like to preview the collections. Three personas can't possibly account for the broad range of users who visit a museum site like this one, but that's okay. Personas aren't intended to describe everyone. Instead, they're composite sketches designed to reflect the real world behaviors, attributes and attitudes of key users. For more on personas, check out Jen Kramer's course, Website Strategy and Planning. Personas match core audience profiles with brand attributes and subject matter.

With these personas in mind, you can then develop content to meet the needs and interests of the audience you're trying to attract and keep.

Understanding your stakeholders

Your constituent base extends well beyond the 80% captured by personas, and even the 20% that covers the remainder of your users. You also have internal stakeholders who are involved in, or at least keenly interested in your project and results. Just as it's critical to understand, your end user audience, it's critical to understand your internal audience as well. Who your stakeholders are varies from company to company and project to project. But chances are, they may include your boss, project team members, executive sponsors and content contributors. You don't need to build personas to capture stakeholder needs. After all, these are real people, not composite sketches. You will want to interview key stakeholders and capture their input. Document what they think is working well, broken, or missing. Find out what they know about your audiences.

Discover how your efforts can help make their jobs easier. Let's look at stakeholder input captured for a fashion retailers website. If you are a high fashion site, you need to look high fashion. I want the site to be able to make the right suggestions for customers. Our stores are known for customer service. Our site should be the same. From these statements, we know that stakeholders want a high fashion look for their new site. A good system for making recommendations, and a strong customer service sensibility. Stakeholders will prove critical to your project's success.

By capturing their input upfront, you'll be better positioned to deliver on their needs and expectations.

Working with influencers

While stakeholders hold part of the reigns to your project's success, there's an even broader constituent group whose satisfaction matters. These are your influencers, who aren't directly involved in your project, but have the power and influence to impact its success. Influencers can be internal or external. Internally, influencers may include thought-leading executives, colleagues with public visibility through social media or conferences. People on other project teams whose opinions and insights you respect. Anyone with the ability to enhance prospects for success can be an influencer.

You don't necessarily need to interview internal influencers like you did stakeholders, you should however make them aware of your efforts and keep them appraised of progress through occasional updates. A similar description applies to external influencers. But here the term applies to individuals outside your organization with the ability to raise your project's visibility. These may be bloggers who like to highlight the latest and greatest in their areas of expertise. Critics who review new releases or updated digital experiences, journalists and media representatives with the capacity to reach broad audiences. You may want to monitor their thinking, and when the timing is right reach out with updates that you hope they will then share with their audiences. Be careful, however, not to reveal any proprietary information. Work closely with PR or marketing colleagues to ensure coordinated outreach.

And if your organization has formal policies for contacting outsiders make sure you follow them. There's a risk in working with external influences, if they don't like what they see they may well spread the word publicly. Even if this happens, it's a good idea to absorb their criticism, evaluate their accuracy and relevance for future enhancements. Remind yourself of the old saying, there's no such thing as bad publicity. Whether internal or external, consider sharing updates with influencers to keep them informed and apprised of progress. After all, while they're not a core part of your project, they have the power and influence to impact your success.

Creating style guides

Walk into a bookstore's writing section and you'll likely see a number of books called style guides. But don't worry, we're not aiming to write a book, just a working guide, and it's okay to start small. Style guides are living, breathing documents that provide a blueprint for content creation. The purpose of a style guide is to, well, guide consistent content creation. And this applies regardless of who is producing the content. Write the guide, so that anyone who picks it up can create consistent content. If you've been following along, you should already have the information you need to get started, voice and tone, personas, and key stakeholders. You'll also want to add spelling, grammar and punctuation conventions that should be followed.

Something as simple as a serial comma can spark debate among content contributors. Capture such potential flashpoints up front to ensure they're documented and available for reference. You'll want to list preferred word choices and their synonyms, so content contributors know what to choose. For example, a computer retailer might include preferred entries like laptop, which is preferred over notebook, and monitor, which is preferred over panel or display. For an example of how your style guide might look, see the exercise files for this course. When your style guide is complete, share it with stakeholders and content contributors.

Ensure it's available online for easy access when needed. If you work with agencies or other external contributors, make sure the guide is accessible for them, too. Your style guide will change after it's distributed, and that's okay. It's a living, breathing document that can expand to include new style clarifications. You'll want to restrict editing rights to select individuals. You don't want just anyone making style changes that trickle out to other content contributors. Keep your style guide up to date, and ensure the current version is always available.

That way, all content contributors can use the same source to produce consistent content.

Working with wireframes

The wire frame is a document that maps how information, assets and objects are arranged within a container. That container can be a webpage, an app, or other digital experience. Wire frames are extremely helpful in planning the relative heirarchy of content within a shared space. You can use software like Omnigraffle or Visio to create wire frames, or you can sketch them on a tablet or piece of paper. What matters is that your wire frames have a clean look and feel that's easy for others to read at a glance. Though different wire frames can have different visual styles, most share a few basic design elements.

If you're new to wire framing, follow these design conventions. Show copy as wavy lines or placeholder text. Some people put real copy in their wire frames. But I recommend against it. You want reviewers to focus on relative placement, not real copy, and if you think reviewers won't be distracted by real copy, think again. The eye tends to gravitate to it by instinct. If you need to show some copy, use placeholder text instead. A good placeholder text language is Lorem Ipsum. You can find passages of it to use online.

For large navigation sections, if the labels are final you can use them in the wire frame. But as with copy, sometimes it's better to avoid too much detail. The same applies to links, which you'll want to note if there're important page elements, but probably won't want to show in detail. Add images as rectangular boxes with a sample sketch or large X spanning each form. If you have videos, show them as rectangles with the sample play button instead of an X. These are just a few examples to help you get started. Follow whatever conventions will render your wire frames universally helpful and easily understood for all key contributors.

If you're working with an information architect, he or she may build and manage the wire frames. Work closely together to ensure content elements are prioritized properly. For more on wire frames, check out Chris Nodder's course, User Experience Fundamentals for Web Design. Wire frames are useful tools for planning digital experiences. Whether laid out in software or sketched on paper, they help you see and explain the relative placement of content within a shared space.

Developing a content matrix

The content matrix is an evolution of the content audit spreadsheet. Where as the audit catalog's pre existing content elements, the matrix includes both pre existing and planned content. It's serves as a resource for content contributors and other project team members who need to check the status of content. If you have content audit, you can save a new version and evolve it into your content matrix. The basic format is similar. Each row lists a content element, with columns capturing the details. You'll want to list the title and description for each element that didn't come over with the content audit. If a site map exists for your project, list where each content element lives. Match the numbering or labeling system used in the site map. For example, if we know that Admissions is labeled 3.0 in the site map, with specific Admissions sections labeled 3.1, 3.2, and so forth, then label the corresponding content matrix entries as 3.0, 3.1, and so on. This will make it easy to match content referenced in the matrix, with it's location in the site map.

List the content status. If it already exists, note that. If it's planned for creation, not that as well. These are just a couple of label ideas. You can use whatever status labels will be the most useful to your project team. Note the links that connect content elements. Use site map labeling for easy reference. Or, if you're not using a site map, list the title of linked elements. Add additional dates to track when a new content item was added to the matrix, and when it was completed. Blogs and other frequently updated content elements are never truly completed.

But go ahead and mark a blog as complete when its content structure is finalized. Then, maintain a separate editorial calendar to plan and log your blog posts. It's also a good idea to list who owns each content elements, that way if questions arise team members will know who to contact. Like the style guide, the content matrix is a living, breathing document that you'll update throughout your project. You'll also want to share this online, but limit editing rights to just the people who need to make updates. The content matrix is a key reference in the development of digital experiences.

Using this spreadsheet will help keep your project on track, and organized.

Using copy decks

CopiedDeck captured text content elements in a word file. They allow for streamlined review and approval of copy, independent of interaction or design elements. Each deck is a word document containing all of the relevant copy elements, such as the title, headings, body copy and link labels. To build your decks, start with your content matrix. Identify all the entries that need copying. If you're building a website with 100 webpages, you'll end up with 100 copy decks, one for each webpage. There's an exception for blogs and similar content systems, updated with an unusually high frequency.

Instead of creating a copy deck for each post, plan and log your posts in a separate editorial calendar. If you're working with existing content, match any copy decks you have with their entries in the content matrix. Then, create copy decks for all of the new copy. Next, look at your wire frames to make sure you've captured all the copy. Wherever there's copy indicated in the wire frame, there should be corresponding copy in the deck. So, you may also need to include things like error messages, or help text if they're indicated in the wireframe.

Name decks to match their location in the content matrix. For example, title your initial help copy deck with the corresponding site map number and title. The v1 indicates this is the first version of the deck. You'd save subsequent updates as v2, v3 and so on. Add the file name of each copy deck to your content matrix. Let's look at a deck for the tour page of a website on California tourism. The deck includes each copy element included in the web page. The title, heading, body copy, and so on.

The text you see in the deck, matches exactly the text you see on the site. Copy decks are great for collecting and reviewing copy without the distraction of interaction or design elements. Once approved, they're the authoritative source for copy that gets published.

Measuring results

Once your copy decks are final and the content strategy is in place for launch, you're ready for the next phase. While the development team prepares for deployment, you can turn your attention to identifying ways to measure success. While you'll have made every effort to deliver exceptional content, you won't be able to gauge its effectiveness until it lives within an active user experience. Before your project launches, make sure your analytics tool is set up to track the right metrics. Some organizations will have teams dedicated to analytics. If that's the case for you, then you'll want to work closely with that team. If you don't already have an analytics tool, there are a number of free online options to choose from.

To learn more about online analytics, you can find courses in the lynda.com library. If you're unsure which metrics to focus on, think about the brand attributes your experienced highlights, and the desired outcomes for your content. Then, choose metrics that support them. Make a list of all the metrics you'll use to measure success. If a key outcome is to get more users to purchase products, measure whether sales are trending up or down. If a key outcome is for users to find self help information and reduce support inquiries, measure usage of help content and support case loads.

Your desired outcomes define key paths through your experience. Identify the steps along those paths and measure how often users are finding and completing them. If your project reworked an existing digital experience, for each key measurement you've identified, get metrics to compare before and after results. You should also track any user feedback systems built into the experience. Such as ratings, comments, or reviews. It's always powerful to demonstrate results through direct user feedback. Until an experience launches, you can't be certain how much it helps users achieve desired outcomes.

Define key measurements before launch, then track them to gauge the success of your new experience.

Managing content

Content isn't static. We change it to better support our users, deliver updates, and sometimes just to refresh an experience. Such changes are part of managing your content. Now, content management is a discipline unto itself. We don't need to consider all the technical ins and outs. But you should have a basic understanding of how to manage your content after it launches. Evaluate content on a regular basis, daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, or anywhere in between. How you set that basis depends upon a couple of varaibles. One is the planned frequency for updating the experience. Another is the speed at which key information in your experience changes. Establish a schedule and stick to it, so long as it continues to meet the needs of users and the experience.

Use key measurements to test whether users are achieving desires outcomes. Go through gap analysis each evaluation cycle to see if you can identify any new areas requiring content. Revise existing content as necessary to meet user and business needs. Once the revised content is deployed, carefully follow the metrics to see if they improve as you'd hoped. If not, then re-evaluate and revise again. Sometimes, it takes multiple cycles to achieve desired results. For blogs and other frequently updated content systems, you won't want to revise posts.

Instead, write new and improved posts that better adapt to user and business needs. For content that has been replaced by newer information, expire or archive it, rather than continuing to revise it unnecessarily. Focus ongoing efforts on current content that continues to deliver value. Again however, blogs are an exception. Keep older blog posts active and available. Following these basic content management practices after your experienced launches will help you support users in achieving desired outcomes while ensuring the experience remains up to date.

Advocating for users

As content strategists, we get to know our audiences. Develop personas to bring them to life. Build style guides to deliver consistent content. All this is to meet user needs while also supporting the business. Content strategy is a user-centered discipline. It's critical we keep our personas and audiences front of mind, throughout the development and maintenance of digital experiences. If we're not meeting user needs, then we're not delivering succesful content.

Be an advocate for your users. When you receive requests for new copy, navigation or interactions, validate if they will meet user needs and expectations.

If they're being proposed solely for business reasons, it's okay to push back a little. Sometimes you need to remind colleagues and stakeholders that users are at the core of your experience. Keep personas alive as part of the ongoing conversation, and continue to update them post launch. Your audience may change with the new experience, so prepared to update your personas as needed to keep pace. Often the team behind the digital experience moves on to other tasks at lanch. Make sure your organization doesn't forget about user needs as soon as the lanch date arrives. Evaluate content regularly post lanch and revise as needed to continue supporting users in achieving desired outcomes.

Content strategy is a critical aspect of delivering a solid, consistent, and long term user experience. The more we can advocate for our users, the better their chances of completing key tasks, and the better our odds of delivering successful content. It's a win, win.

Sharing best practices

It's important to keep those with the greatest stakes in your success apprised of their investment. Keep stakeholders informed of progress throughout your project, as well as after the new or enhanced user experience launches. But you can spread your finding to an even broader audience. If other parts of your organization have yet to embrace content strategy. Document your experiences and share them as best practices, presentations, or briefs. Pull actionable suggestions from stakeholder input, and show how you delivered on those goals and requests. Demonstrating the benefits delivered by content strategy will both show the value of your recently launched project and improve expectations for future work. Outside your organization, look for opportunities to network with other user experienced professionals.

Conferences and meetups are perfect venues for the informal sharing of experiences. Twitter is also a valuable tool in building project visibility as well as your personal brand. Share non-confidential case studies and best practices that will enhance your organization's profile. LinkedIn is another great resource. You can find dozens of content strategy groups, some of which may even be targeted to your region or industry. You are your greatest advocate and the individual most knowledgeable about your work. Don't be shy. Share best practices that demonstrate the value of content strategy.

Next steps

Get to know your content, all of it, audit what's existing, and build a matrix for everything you'll manage moving forward. It's a time consuming process, but you can't be sure you have effective content, if you don't know what all is out there. Create or update your style guide. Consistency in voice, tone, and usage, goes a long way towards presenting, successful content. Define your audience and bring key segments to life through personas.

Interview your stakeholders. They're the ones who invest in your efforts. Take their needs and interests into account, and do what you can to make their jobs easier while improving the user experience. Finally, be a user advocate. Don't forget that you're work isn't done at launch. Measure, maintain, and improve your content. Do everything you can to keep your organization user-centered.