

The Importance of CONTENT DESIGN

Maximize your website's impact and effectiveness



INTRODUCTION

Content is king. We hear this all the time. Presumably, it is meant to imply that nothing is more important than content, because a king can do whatever he wants; his subjects bowing to his every whim. This is not an accurate analogy. Online, the User is king. Content is more of a jester than a king; because if your content can create a pleasing experience it will find the king's favor, and if not; it's into the moat... and something else will take its place.

Let's say for argument's sake that you have the perfect content. Your carefully keyword-loaded pages are ready to go in a concise, neatly-formatted document that your marketing and sales departments and IA developers all agree is precisely what you need to say. *Now what?* Well, first of all... *call me* (because I've never seen this before and would love to before I retire.) But more to the point: have you identified the calls-to-action you need to measure? Do you know how best to draw the reader to the key focal areas of your content? Who has edited this material, and have you vetted it with outside readers yet? You took such great care authoring your content. Have you given any thought to its visual appeal?

Based on my experience, the following scenario is more likely. You've allocated as much budget as possible to afford your new Content Management System and made sure that your new website is a functional masterpiece, but only allowed a few weeks at the end of the project for a group of interns to migrate your existing content and data to the new site. You'll review the content at a later date.

Companies that don't take the time to design their content are squandering a golden opportunity to make a real connection with their users. Buyers buy and users share based on emotional responses and aesthetic connections to products. Advertisers know this; and design-focused companies like Apple have built fortunes based on those connections. When the product in question is your website content... don't underestimate the competitive advantages well-designed content could offer you.

In this paper, I will offer some insights into how to prepare your content in advance of a website redesign, or for implementation into a CMS project, namely:

- Reasons for doing a content audit
- Ways to create user-centric web content
- Future-proofing your content with HTML5
- Some effective basic design principles
- Considerations for designing for dynamic content
- Considerations for designing for responsive content

If at any time you feel you would like some additional information please [contact us](#) and we would be happy to answer any of your related questions.

THE CONTENT AUDIT

"Content precedes design. Design in the absence of content is not design, it's decoration." ~ Jeffery Zeldman

When was the last time your website content was reviewed? Is it up to date? Was it written for the web, or has it been pulled from your print brochures or annual reports? These are important questions to consider before starting a project. Typically, project teams will begin with a **content inventory** to determine their scope of work and count pages in a spreadsheet, but this doesn't speak to the quality or effectiveness of that content.

A content audit's focus is quite different. A content audit is required to assess each piece of content based on defined project goals. The criteria for defining the viability of a piece of content will vary, but in every project there are factors that need to be considered in advance of development:

- Who is the primary audience?
- What is the primary business goal?
- Are we facilitating the user's goals?

Abe Lincoln famously said "if I had six hours to cut down a tree, I'd spend the first four hours sharpening my axe." Think of auditing your content as sharpening your axe. Make no mistake, doing a content audit can be a very time-consuming endeavor. But it is also the best way to ensure that all the other steps you are investing in to get your content to the consumer are worthwhile.

A content audit can help you:

- Get a sense of the real scope of a project
- Understand the strengths and weaknesses of your existing content
- Identify content gaps or remove outdated or unnecessary pages
- Focus stakeholders and project teams on content requirements
- Design for effective delivery of critical content

PERSONAS

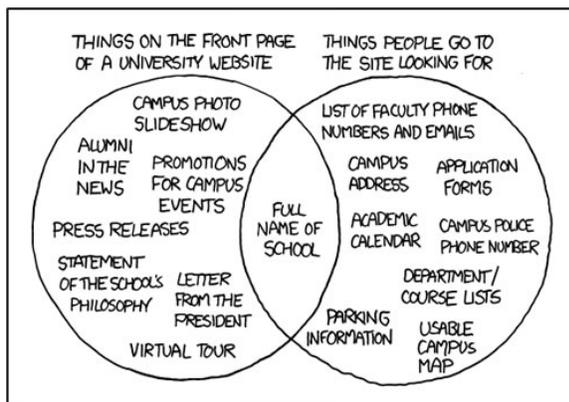
Personas are a tool used by creative web professionals to identify who a target audience is, sometimes in finite detail, so that a message or user experience can be specifically tailored to address their needs. This information is usually pieced together from analytics, historic sales data or perhaps come from a desire to target a completely new user group.

The idea is that the more you can identify with the thoughts and needs of your user, the greater the chance that you can create content and experiences that they will find useful, enjoyable to read, even sharable.

For example, if your product is sporting equipment - instead of saying our users are men aged 20-36 –say our user is Ted: *Ted is 28 years old. He makes only \$22,000 a year. He relaxes by playing weekend sports and going out for drinks with friends. His online time is spent watching videos and reading sports news. He has average computer ability and is fairly active on social networks. He visits our site occasionally because he likes to read reviews of new products, even if he can't afford them right now.*

In Ted’s case, he would likely share information about your products if it were easy to do, so including social media tools with every product review would be important. Developing a handful of representative personas can help your content creators get into character; and recognize the goals of the audience – instead of overlooking areas that real users might appreciate.

CREATING USER-CENTRIC CONTENT



This image has been around for years, and it’s meant to be funny, but it’s also a reminder that sometimes the desires of the stakeholders and the needs of the audience do not coincide.

Firstly, I’d like to make a distinction between user-centric and user-defined content. No one is saying that your users should dictate what your content strategy is. However, developing and effectively delivering content that is both usable **and** supports your business goals is the key to your online success.

For any given page of content on your site, ask yourself ‘*what is the goal for this page?*’ Is it to educate? Sell product? Collect leads? Planning for what you want a visitor to do when they get to your web page can greatly impact what you say, how you say it and in how many words you say it. It should also impact other important

elements on a page, like your call-to-action placement or social media links.

For example, on a landing page that is meant to sell, efforts should be made to convert visitors to customers right then and there. Content language will be very direct, concise and work in tandem with design to evoke a specific action from a user. If the page is meant to educate a person during their research phase of buying, your content can be more in depth. Both approaches serve the user’s needs as well as your business goals.

CALLS TO ACTION

As mentioned, identifying critical business goals is key when creating web content. Once you determine what you want your visitor to do, content creators and designers can go about their jobs of compelling those visitors to do it.

In most cases you’ll want to give the user something actionable once they’ve reached your page; even if that is as simple as “stay engaged by reading more.” Don’t make users scroll to find out what to do. Design your content so that it’s immediately clear how the user can interact with the page to facilitate your primary goals (and theirs).

CHUNKING? IS THAT EVEN A WORD?

When your user visits your web page can they find what they’re looking for immediately?

We know that people online don’t tend to read in the same way they read their favorite book. They read in ‘chunks’ – digesting information in bite-sized pieces; skimming page content by titles until they find a section worthy of investigation.

If your content is word-heavy, make certain that you have broken it up into meaningful sections with relevant titles to allow for this kind of read. Better still would be to work towards reducing the total number of words whenever possible.

This document itself, as a website page, would be better served by being a collection of smaller sectioned-off pages with an easy to use navigation system so you could access the information you were most interested in.

Users *will* scroll below the fold if they find value in doing so, but the idea of putting the most relevant content first is still the way to go. The longer your web pages are, the more attention spans will begin to wander. Content designers can break up long blocks of content with things like bulleted lists, semantic headings, relevant graphics and white space. For the user, placing critical content at the bottom of a long page won't be like finding the prize in the cereal box. Didn't you always reach in to get it anyways?

WHAT'S UP, DOCTYPE?

If creating web content were like buying a car, reviewing the HTML markup of that content would be looking under the hood. If your content is coming from an existing site, it's imperative that a code review be done to see how your content looks behind the scenes. Today, designers and front-end developers have a wealth of tools to present and prioritize your content using CSS and Javascript; which can all be **undone** by legacy code from your previous project. While it may look the same on the

surface, older HTML markup can be full of deprecated (invalid) tags, bloated inline styles and dreaded table layouts.

Cleaning up your older HTML can make your page perform faster and improve the overall user experience, and it can also provide opportunities for designers to leverage the strength of today's modern browsers to deliver some spectacular results.

Another consideration is which version of HTML do you use. While older HTML4 pages can be simply brought up to the newer HTML5 standard just by the addition of the <DOCTYPE> tag; that really doesn't mean anything to your content. HTML5 includes a range of new, semantic tags meant to help services and devices understand the intended use of your content – which in turn can help you deliver it to your users more effectively.

New HTML5 tags to consider that don't appear in standard Word or CMS editors:

- <header>, <footer>, <nav> help search engines isolate your meaningful content
- <section>, <article>, <aside> tags help define your content boundaries and prepare it for portable use, like RSS
- <video> tags replace older <object> code and have browser-based user tools

Future use of your content is hard to predict, but bringing it into the new HTML5 specification is an important step towards ensuring that your content can adapt to any near-future application.

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.

Oatmeal Raisin Cookie Recipe
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 **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

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THE VALUE OF BASIC FORMATTING

Take a look at the recipe above. Each of these three panels contains the same information, but the panel on the left is very difficult to read. This is the kind of content import you could expect from a completely automated system. No formatting at all. No regard to visual cues.

The next panel is about as far as most CMS content creators will go. The information has been divided by natural breaks. It's easier to read than the first panel, but it's still challenging. At a glance, is it a recipe or a poem? In the final panel, we find the information finally easy to read, and therefore more usable, as it's sectioned in a way that allows us to find any particular chunk of information as needed.

The takeaway from this recipe example is that formatting your content is more than just an aesthetic, secondary treatment of your

information. Design can vastly improve the effectiveness of your information, which in turn improves your users' experiences. Equally it shows how a lack of content design can grossly undermine your content's ability to reach the viewer.

FIND YOUR FOCUS

Once you've determined your primary goal for a page there are a variety of design techniques that can be employed to make calls-to-action the primary visual focus. Color, size, and shape of elements are all important aesthetics. You can also manage the focus of your visitors' attention with contrast between elements. Below is an example of a post headline and some meta information underneath about the author and the publishing date:

Lorem Ipsum Dolor Sit Amet
 1st Jan, 50 BC - by Cicero

All the text is set in black and it's legible enough, but all three elements of this content have similar visual weight. If we increase the contrast between the elements it allows us to accentuate whichever one we choose.

Lorem Ipsum Dolor Sit Amet

1st Jan, 50 BC - by Cicero

Now our focus is squarely put on the article title, and the other elements fade into the background. Not everything has to have the same value on the page. This way, you encourage visitors to easily focus their attention on the most important pieces of your content.

THE POSITIVES OF NEGATIVE SPACE

One of the most crucial elements in an interface is the white space or 'negative space' between elements. What some content creators worry will appear to be "empty", negative space actually plays an important role in how our eyes move around a space. By manipulating the white space of a page, we can indicate relationships between certain elements or groups of elements; and change the visual flow.

So, for example, by putting the headline near the article text we indicate that it is related to that text. The text is then placed farther away from other elements to separate it and make it more readable. Here's an example in which white space could be improved:

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet.

Maecenas tincidunt dictum feugiat. Nam hendrerit, massa eu aliquam tincidunt, erat magna commodo diam, ac pharetra sem enim a sapien.

Nullam libero enim.

Luctus sit amet bibendum sed, pellentesque nec purus. In non eros nec urna dapibus dapibus vel ultricies erat. Quisque vitae odio sed elit aliquam suscipit. Nullam adipiscing mollis nulla, sit amet porta dui gravida non.

Pellentesque gravida consequat blandit.

Ut a rutrum diam. Phasellus consequat lacinia rhoncus. Maecenas aliquet vel justo non hendrerit. Nam egestas mattis ipsum vel facilisis.

The text is certainly readable, but because the spaces above and below each heading are equal, they don't separate each piece of text clearly. We can improve this by increasing the white space between each section and also by slightly tightening the line height of the paragraphs:

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet.

Maecenas tincidunt dictum feugiat. Nam hendrerit, massa eu aliquam tincidunt, erat magna commodo diam, ac pharetra sem enim a sapien.

Nullam libero enim.

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Pellentesque gravida consequat blandit.

Ut a rutrum diam. Phasellus consequat lacinia rhoncus. Maecenas aliquet vel justo non hendrerit. Nam egestas mattis ipsum vel facilisis.

Don't be afraid of white space. Sometimes there is the tendency to fill up 'empty' space; but white space helps reduce the cognitive load for visitors. When a new visitor approaches a design layout, the first thing they do is to scan the page and divide the content area into digestible chunks of information.

Dense, complex content is harder to read, scan, and work with. Hierarchical structures reduce that complexity. The more you can create visual hierarchy by adding white space, the easier your content will be to digest. The proper use of heading tags and basic HTML such as blockquotes, paragraphs and lists will do wonders for your content. Content creators must be well-versed in using these tags; which are common to most WYSIWYG editors.

DESIGNING FOR DYNAMIC CONTENT/CMS

Static websites are usually created by a designer page by page. That designer has finite control over the content design, and the resulting output is presented in a consistent manner. But content controlled by a CMS is often input by non-technical, non-design staff who don't necessarily know or care about how to maintain the consistency of the design.

Projects with multiple content editors and creators often lose their consistency altogether and become a free-for-all. Word document formatting, presentational tables, and tags ensue. It isn't pretty.

A dynamic content project needs careful planning when it comes to layout. The key for your designers to remember here is to limit the structural necessity for any HTML elements that cannot intuitively be created using the CMS editor toolbar. <div> and tags are great – but there's no place for them within the content editor window. Similarly, no javascript should be embedding inside a block of content – so avoid decorative galleries and sliders if they don't simply reconfigure simple unordered lists into code at load time.

A good CMS design takes into consideration all the potential future needs of the layout, and accommodates dramatic changes to the amount of content within the page. Build enough structure to adapt to anything, and then expect the content to change regularly.

DESIGNING FOR RESPONSIVE CONTENT

When it comes to adapting to anything – nothing could describe Responsive Design better. For the last couple of years, responsive design has been the hot topic in web development, and rightly so. It is how we describe designing a website without any preconceived ideas about how the user will view its content – a site that seamlessly responds to whatever device is viewing it, and renders the content appropriately.

As you can imagine, planning the architecture of a responsive project is even more complex than a typical dynamic site, and requires extra levels of design consideration. But what about the content? While we have the ability to control the visibility of certain content on a device scale – the latest thinking is that assumptions about which content a user wants to read on a phone or tablet is just another preconception we have to leave behind. We design to show all content to everyone, and focus our efforts on making certain every bit of content is useful. There is no room for bloat on a cell phone.

Fixed width elements, data tables, videos and in some cases images may all need to be reconfigured to adapt to a responsive system. This isn't for the faint of heart, and requires some level of expertise.

STYLE GUIDES

So how do you design for content that doesn't exist yet? There is an approach that may help. A style guide is used to graphically illustrate the design of your content to content creators and editors alike, so that they can work within the existing framework without breaking your designs, or create new works that will seamlessly fit.

A style guide should at least cover the tags that a content creator will have access to in your CMS content editor toolbar:

- Heading styles – from 1 to 6
- bold and emphasis text
- paragraphs and unformatted text. (text that goes mistakenly unformatted needs to be considered)
- Ordered and Unordered lists
- links

Include color palette choices for links and headings and create an editor stylesheet for your CMS to render in the editor window, so that content updates reflect the accurate styles in real time

I hope you find some food for thought in these pages. Content design is going to be a growing asset to any company who puts in the effort, as competition online grows and content is optimized to the Nth degree. As search engines change how they find value in site content, and companies evolve their messages to attract more visitors – the winners will be those who appeal to the user experience and design their content to connect with people.

Combined Headings h1 + h2

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet
Donec tristique eros vel est ultricies

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit.

Combined Headings "h1 + p"

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Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit.

Combined Headings "h2 + p"

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Combined Headings "h3 + p"

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example of headings style guide

ABOUT FALCON-SOFTWARE

Falcon-Software has extensive design, UX/UI and content design experience, as well as a focus on CMS integration and vendor partner development experience covering SMB to Enterprise installations. We continually consult with industry experts and can also refer consultants to assist in your CMS Selection and implementation needs. Our production team has been instrumental in planning and developing large Content Management and Enterprise Intranet solutions for many Fortune 500 companies.

Please feel free to contact us directly if you wish to learn more about how we can help you with your new project.

Falcon-Software has deployed hundreds of web content management projects using the leading .NET web content management solutions - [Ektron](#), [Kentico](#), [SharePoint](#), [Sitecore](#) and [Sitefinity](#).

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With offices in Dallas, Seattle, Toronto and Victoria, Falcon-Software has been offering a unique combination of e-business strategy, creative web design and Web CMS application expertise when developing feature-rich website solutions for organizations worldwide since 1993.

- CMS Websites & Intranets
- Content Audit & Analysis
- Content Migration Services
- Legacy Application Assessment
- Custom CMS Applications
- Pre-Built Application Modules
- Software Integration Services
- Multilingual CMS Globalization
- CMS Hosting Services
- Online & On-Site CMS Training
- Social & Mobile Integration

CONTACT US

Falcon-Software Company, Inc.

www.falcon-software.com

General@Falcon-Software.com

1-800-707-1311