

Content Management: Whose Job Is It Anyway?

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The role of a content manager and the process of developing content for a web site is often an unclear task. There seems to be little to no written methodology or online blogs about the topic. Sometimes, content simply ‘appears’ when someone realizes the task is left undone. Other times, a copywriter is hired, and this person is given a daunting task he or she is incapable of executing. Generally, when a company decides to redesign their site, they do not take the task of content creation and management fully into the scope of the project, and very rarely understand the nature of the role, the process or the deliverables involved.

This 2-part article addresses the role of a content manager and the process of content creation. In Part 1, we define the role and clarify the qualifications. In Part II, we dive into the details of the content management process and workflow and how it fits into the big picture. We also offer resources to aid in the quest of clear content creation.

Part I: Defining the Role

Part II: The Process

Phase 1: Discovery & Clarification – Gathering Data

Phase 2: Setting Framework – Outlining Content

Phase 3: Writing – Creating the Copy Deck

Phase 4: Publishing - Posting, Reviewing & Editing

Part I: Defining the Role

The role of a content manager is difficult to define. Applying for a content manager job is like applying for a job that not only does not exist, but for which the company doesn't even realize the need. Many clients think we're talking about the role of a copywriter, but it is more than straight copywriting. The role falls into several categories during the process, from marketing to information design. The content manager will work between the client (company) and the web development team during the process. Most projects we've worked on follow one of the following three scenarios when it comes to developing content:

ONE: Client Magic. The client thinks they will magically produce the content for the site on time using their existing marketing resources, without hiring an expensive copywriter. Don't they already have brochures and existing site copy they can repurpose for this new launch? And if there isn't enough time – isn't this a virtual environment where you can add any unfinished pages after the site is launched?

TWO: Copywriter to the Rescue. The client has a copywriter who they have worked with in the past – someone who has written company white papers, marketing or collateral materials. The catch: Usually this copywriter writes for print, or for technical manuals and has little understanding of how the web works. He/she does not understand online linking and navigation, and how writing for the web differs from print or advertising. This person can learn, and their experience is valuable, but sometimes the curve is a painful one for all involved.

THREE: Design Team Knows All. The client assumes the newly hired web design/development team has the answer – after all they have done this many times before. The design team must be able to take the copy from the old site and massage it into updated content for the new site. Also, there is a ton of existing marketing materials in both print and digital format. So all the client needs to do is provide some updated bios and product page information. Isn't this what we are paying the design team to produce?

There is a fourth scenario – one where the client gets it and hires a competent content manager who has the background and experience to get the content organized, written and delivered in a timely manner. Or the company has a system in place with internal workflow, approval processes and a staff of writers (or contractors) in place for ongoing updates. However, this rarely happens.

Part I: Defining the Role (continued)

Most companies assume when we tell them they need to hire a content manager, we are telling them to hire a copywriter. This is not the case. Although you need someone who can write well, this person may need to manage a copywriter or a team of writers. The hired individual is extremely well rounded and self-running. They might have writing skills, but do they have web knowledge? They might have management skills, but do they have industry expertise?

It is extremely difficult to find the perfect resource – but you need to know what you are looking for in order to find the right person. Finding someone to manage the content process for your website requires the person to have (some of) the following characteristics:

- ⇒ **Self-Running:** The person in this role needs to be self-running and ‘get it’ by understanding what is required to develop website content. Each project and situation is different. This person will need to manage a very daunting and deadline driven process. Digging for information, pushing to make deadlines and running solo without much guidance is par for the course.
- ⇒ **Organized:** The content manager needs to have the organizational and management skills to manage the process of content development. This generally requires a project management or producer mentality – the ability to set and make deadlines, manage resources and budgeted time, set expectations and communicate effectively. This person needs to be detail-oriented and able to handle multiple deliverables at one time.
- ⇒ **A writer or editor:** The ability to write and edit is a critical component of the role however this person may hire other copywriters to actually produce final content if his or her style or writing ability does not match the needs of the project. Editing skills are necessary to help conform the style and tone of various marketing materials or previous site copy. Having a background in marketing is helpful but not mandatory.
- ⇒ **Web savvy:** The content manager doesn’t need to know the ins and outs of HTML but should be familiar with enough markup to call out links and bolded or italicized text. They need to understand how web writing differs from regular marketing copy. Navigational copy needs to be addressed (some call it ‘navitorial copy’) along with descriptions of images and page titles. Paragraphs need to be short and action oriented.
- ⇒ **Versed in information design:** The content manager and/or copywriter should work very closely with the information designer on the web team. The content manager, if this is one of his or her skills, may actually produce what will become the content outline and the initial wireframes for the project. This means the content manager needs to understand the nuances of navigation, labeling and action-oriented copy.
- ⇒ **Knows the client’s industry:** This is preferred, though not required. A smart individual can interview, research and gain insight into the client’s industry fairly quickly. It is a bonus if the content manager has background in the client’s particular industry, along with the audience who will be interacting with the site.

This list of characteristics represents a best-case scenario for a web project -- especially one with no existing content and a tight deadline. If you invest in the right resource, you can also expect this person to help write and manage the creation of content for marketing efforts (on and offline), product documentation, site updates and more. It is a worthwhile effort to screen and hire the right individual. Be aware: You might need to go through more than one or two people to find an ideal fit.

This job is generally either a contract position or a side-responsibility for someone already on the web team or in the marketing department. Copywriters or content managers charge a premium for their time (between \$65/hr to \$125/hr). Because this person will be working closely with the client during the process, it is recommend the client hire this person directly.

Part II: The Process

There is not one perfect way to manage the process of content development. Just as every web project is different, so is the manner in which you address the process. The following is a framework for managing the content development process in tandem with the development of a web site. Use this methodology as a starting point and as a guide.

Phase 1: Discovery & Clarification: Gather Data

Phase 2: Setting Framework: Outlining Content

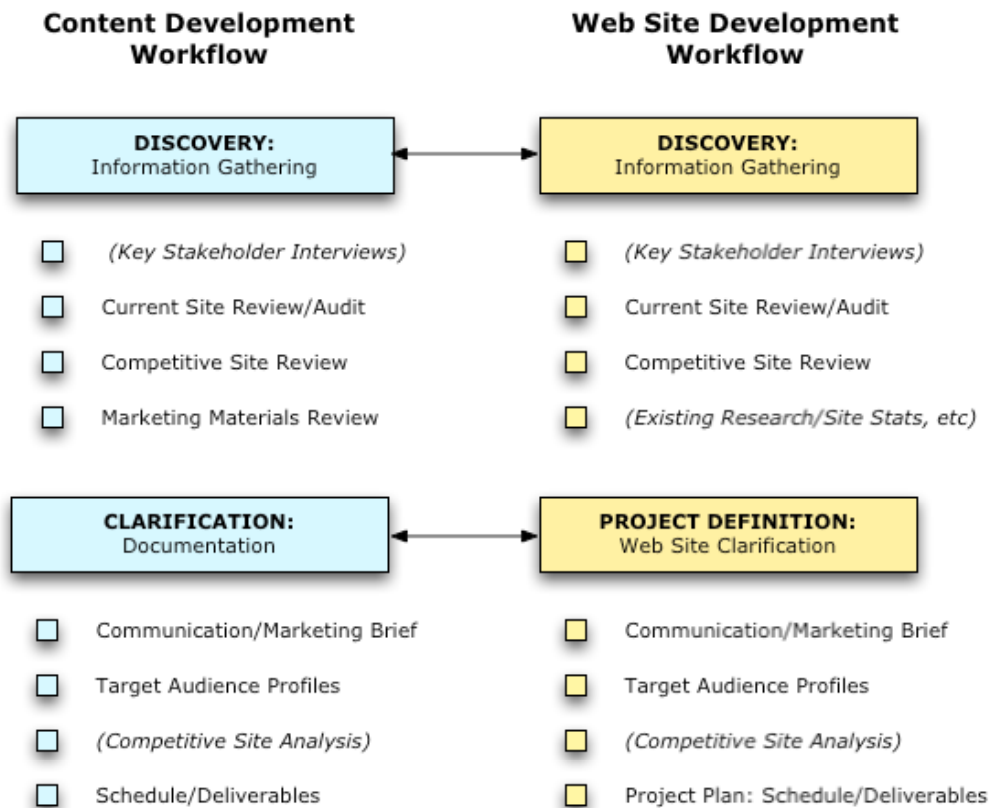
Phase 3: Writing: Creating the Copy Deck

Phase 4: Publishing: Posting, Reviewing & Editing

Phase 1: Discovery & Definition - Gathering Data

Generally, the content manager does whatever is necessary to gather data and produce the deliverables necessary for the site design and development. In the Discovery Phase, the content manager should spend time talking to the key stakeholders in the company to learn what their business goals are, find out who the audience is and what they currently desire and strategize about how to merge the two sets of needs. Questions such as how the web site fits into the larger corporate strategy; how the current (soon to be ousted) site meets or fails current measurable goals; if the new site is using the old content; etc. should be asked. Research into the competition and overall industry should also be conducted. These do not have to be formal endeavors. However, having a solid overview of the company's industry, web site strategy and audience is the goal for this stage.

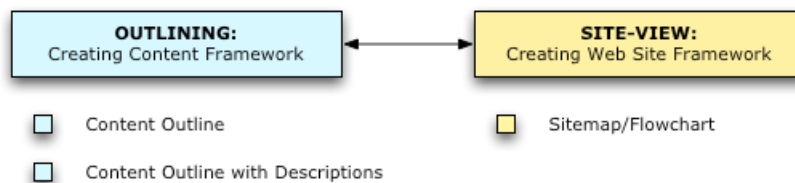
Before continuing, clarification of the overall goals, audience and strategy should be produced as a Communication/Marketing Brief. The content schedule and list of deliverables should be clearly outlined and approved by all involved. Make sure to add time in for QA (Quality Assurance) of copy prior to project launch. Don't depend on last minute editing online of copy and content. Although this is inevitable, it is often what leads to sloppy mistakes and accidental overwriting of pages, layout and more.



Part II: The Process (continued)

Phase 2: Setting Framework - Outlining Content

The next phase of the content development cycle is creating the content framework. This is created in the form of a content outline, which captures the main sections of the site (I, II, III, IV, V, etc.) and then adds in known secondary and tertiary pages (a, b, c, d, etc.) with placeholder titles. This may be as easy as using what currently exists or it may involve several meetings (with conflicting results) to generate a new or modified framework and outline of the site. This outline may change during the site structuring process. But putting together the framework for the site via a content outline is the best way to determine the scope and depth of the site plus the scope and depth of the content writing and acquisition process.



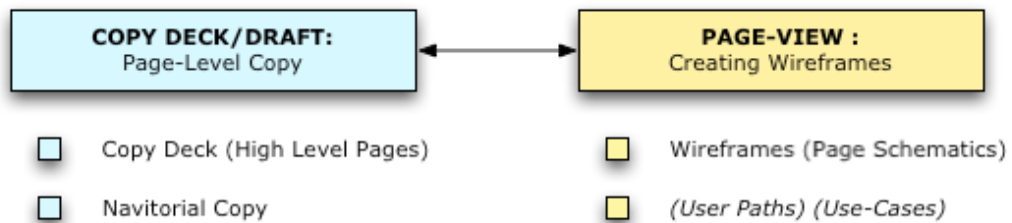
Some content managers (in their copywriting role) prefer to start writing copy for the main pages of the site and move on to secondary or additional pages of the site after the main pages are completed. Sometimes it is difficult to glean the entire site’s content without starting work on the high-level marketing messages and overall goals. This is acceptable as a stalling point for a short time (in order for the copywriter to truly get his or her head around the project) but the first deliverable must be a comprehensive **site outline**.

Content Audit: Sometimes it is necessary to conduct a complete content audit of the outgoing site in order to determine what stays and what goes during the content development process. For a site with several hundred pages, this can be a daunting and painful task. Someone needs to go through the site, starting with the main pages and cull. This someone might be client side, or it might be the content manager. This is a necessary step for some projects – plan time and patience for the task.

Part II: The Process (continued)

Phase 3: Writing - Creating the Copy Deck

The next step in the process is to begin putting the content together. Remember, content is not just copy – it is text, graphics, quotes, advertising and active links, <TITLE> tags and more. Understanding how to approach the creation of the actual content takes experience. A good way to start is to determine the readiness of the content. What content will be ported over in its existing format from the current site? What content exists in digital form and needs little to no editing? What content needs to be created from scratch? Divide the content into chunks of deliverables that make sense, and attach due dates and review cycles to each chunk. Plan for enough time to review and edit the copy offline, and then to review and edit the copy once it is integrated into the HTML of the site itself. Paper does not screen copy make.



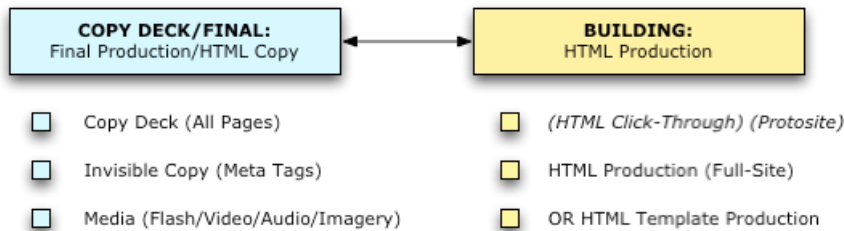
The copy deck can be developed in stages, starting with a description of what will be on the page “a short paragraph or two” and the call to action on the page – shown by an actual HTML link or some other graphics. Also consider sidebar information and other page elements such as quotes or advertising. The web design team will need to plan for these elements as they work out the wireframing of the page in their own site-structuring phase. Working collaboratively during this stage is a must. Potential confusion and frustration often occur during this timeframe, when the client and copywriter just want to start writing directly into the HTML of a page, and the web design team needs to know what goes *on* the page in order to start the design process effectively.

Content Management Systems (CMS) and XML-based sites: The development for CMS site differs from a static HTML site. Most large CMS-driven sites still rely on a top layer of straight HTML, with most of the second level pages and portions of the HTML pages populated by an object-oriented content management system. This means the site is built using a series of templates. These templates are set up with a header, footer, titles, and areas for body copy, sidebars and navigation. It may be necessary for a content manager to help define these areas in advance of writing the content outline, or getting into the main navigation, which can change ‘on the fly’ due to the flexibility of a robust CMS system. This also means a separate workflow not directly addressed in this article. Think of your site’s content as components of information – objects placed on individual pages such as news, ads, special deals and more.

Part II: The Process (continued)

Phase 4: Publishing - Posting, Reviewing & Editing

The final step in the process of content development is to finalize the copy deck and integrate the copy into the development process following the building phase of the site. If templates have been created by the web design team, the integration team should be building out the entire site and pouring in the content from the final deck. This allows the copy and linking structure to be viewed and tested in HTML. The navigational copy, links, invisible copy (see call out below) graphics and images should all be in place. This is the final run through before showtime!



The truth is, generally at this stage, all of the content is not completed and the client has a very well intended but poorly timed plan of eliminating the pages that aren't yet completed. This causes a lot of trouble from the development side, as these pages have been built and linked to. Proper planning and estimating time and resources from the framework/site-structuring phase would help solve this problem earlier in the process. At this stage, have a solid plan for content revisions as editing online, on the fly, may cause issues with version control if the site is still in production.

Invisible Copy: Whether search engine focused or not – every HTML page needs a descriptive <TITLE> tag. The <TITLE> tag remains the most highly ranked component of a page's search engine results. Keywords are also important, although lately it has been shown that <meta data> is less critical than it has been in the past. ALT tags are descriptions accompanying images that preload the image. This allows individuals using text readers to view the site, as well as helps them if they are viewing over slow connection speeds or using a browser with images turned off. Setting the preferred format (i.e., img: setting sun or nav: about us) for ALT, <TITLE> and meta data should be done well in advance of pages being built in HTML. However, often it is left up to whomever is doing the HTML, which is not ideal.

Summary

The most successful redesign projects are those where a content manager is identified in the beginning of the project and works through the proofing of developed HTML web pages. Hopefully, awareness of the critical need of the content manager, plus familiarity with the content development process will become more of a norm than it is today. Thus, everyone's job -- especially the content manager's -- will be more understood and appreciated.

Links to resources on effective writing for the web:

<http://www.useit.com/papers/webwriting/> - Jacob Nielsen's research on how users read on the web and how writers should write for the web.

<http://www.sun.com/980713/webwriting/> - A summary by Jacob Nielsen and Sun's Science Office of how they improved website usability by rewriting content.

http://www.gotomedia.com/resources_structure_content.html - A Macromedia and gotomedia co-authored resource on website content structuring and development.

<http://usableweb.com/topics/001310-0-0.html> - A collection of links about writing and editing web content.

<http://www.webtechniques.com/archives/2001/02/kilian/> - Killian's thoughts on web writing and molding information to the web.

<http://www.webwiseone.com> - A company of former technical writers offering humorous, conversational and instructional content solutions.

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0735711518/102-1791781-4129760?v=glance>
Hot Text: Web Writing that Works - A book that provides a summary of current thought on "user-centered" writing for the web.