CHAPTER 8

GET FAMILIAR WITH YOUR CONTENT

This is the time when you answer the question “What in the world is going on with our content today?” Some might think, “Who cares; the strategy will dictate what needs to happen with it in the future.” Others posture, “We need to know every single detail about everything before we can move forward.”

I don’t think you can say, “who cares” because, well, you do. You care because you need to know what content you have to work with to create what your strategy determines you need. You need to know what content needs to go away.

And I don’t think the “we need to know every single detail” approach is a terribly effective use of time either. That said, I want some questions answered about how much content there is, in what formats and channels it resides, who owns it, who it’s for, what purposes it was created to support, and whether the content lines up to what users want and expect.

So, my approach is somewhere in the middle.

THE CONTENT LANDSCAPE

Documenting and understanding the entire ecosystem of content is important for several reasons. First, you or your clients may not even know about all the places where the content lives. I once worked on a project in which my client told me they had three websites. They actually had 17, and all of them had to be considered to develop the strategy.

Second, web properties and other content channels help tell the story of the role that content plays within the organization. The content ecosystem can suggest that the organization values content as a strategic business asset, an afterthought to a cool experience, or even a bandage for issues with their offerings. Knowing where they fall can help you determine how best to position your recommendations—and hopefully inch them toward the strategic business asset mindset if they aren't there already.

MAKE A LIST

Your first step is to list all the content relevant to your project. Depending on the scope of your project, your list could be short or very, very long. **Table 8.1** provides some example project scopes and content that might be part of the ecosystem for each.

Now, start digging for places that the content you need to take a look at might live. I do this a couple of ways. Typically, my initial list comes from stakeholder interviews. They will bring up web properties my client hadn't mentioned. I commonly hear about websites or blogs created on a whim once upon a time and never kept up to date. So, when someone mentions a place where project-related content might live, write it down and get as much information about its purpose, history, status, and ownership as you can.

Next, poke around the content you knew about when you started the project. You can do this simultaneously with stakeholder interviews. But wait until after the interviews, when you'll have a bit more information to help put the content into context.

I almost always find links to or web addresses for additional websites, references to mobile applications, or calls to action to visit social media accounts I didn't know existed. More often than not, my client contact didn't know they existed either. And keep in mind that these surprise content channels can pop up on offline items, such as packaging, print collateral, signage, and technical documentation.

Add them all to the list. Then, follow up with stakeholders to find out the pertinent details (purpose, history, status, ownership, and so on).

TABLE 8.1 **PROJECT SCOPE EXAMPLES**

SCOPE	EXAMPLE	CONTENT TO CONSIDER
Enterprise—A project in which you are developing a content strategy for all the content the organization creates, curates, and solicits for and from all external audiences for all relevant purposes, such as sales, marketing, and customer support	Financial services organization—Sells its products through a network of advisors and needs a content strategy that encompasses content for sales, marketing, and customer support	▪ Sales presentations ▪ Customer support knowledge center ▪ Brochures and other collateral ▪ White papers ▪ Webpage content across all external-facing properties ▪ Client publications ▪ Transactional emails ▪ RFP responses ▪ Mobile applications ▪ Point-of-sale signage ▪ Packaging ▪ Social media
Function, Audience, or Purpose—A project in which you are developing a content strategy for content created, curated, or solicited by a specific function (marketing, HR, customer support, and so on), in support of a specific purpose, and/or for a specific audience (internal, external, prospect, current customer, and so on)	Regional grocery store brand—Needs a content strategy that encompasses its marketing content for customers and prospective customers in all channels that marketing controls	▪ Promotional content on the company website ▪ Promotional content on store websites ▪ Social media content ▪ Promotional in-store signage ▪ Store circular creative
Property—A project in which you're developing a content strategy for a specific website, application, publication, or other singular channel	Private college—Needs a content strategy that encompasses the content it creates, curates, and solicits on its primary .edu website	▪ Content on the primary .edu site ▪ Content on other website properties the site links to or that link to the primary .edu site ▪ Social media content that drives to the website or to which the website drives
Parcel—A project in which you're developing a content strategy for a section of a web property, application, publication, or other singular channel	Merchant—Needs a content strategy for corporate and user-generated customer help content on a primary website	▪ Company-produced content on the website ▪ User-generated content on the website ▪ Support-related social media content ▪ Support content that lives in other places

DOCUMENT THE DETAILS

As I'm making my list, I document what I learn using a spreadsheet. This document will be a valuable artifact for you and your client or stakeholders as you move through the project.

Some of the information I record is

- Name, such as *main site*
- Location, such as *www.mainsite.com*
- History, such as *was created during merger to satisfy legal requirements*
- Status, such as *still serves as main marketing channel for prospects*
- Audience, such as *prospective clients*
- Purpose, such as *help potential clients get familiar with our products and services before they contact us*
- Traffic or usage, such as *gets 1,230 unique visits per month*

You might also want to specify whether you'll analyze the newly discovered content in more detail as part of this project. Include notes about your early thoughts on whether the content should stay in its current form, get wrapped into something else, or go away completely.

Content Strategy Tool 8.1 is a downloadable spreadsheet for recording this content. Here's what it might look like.

ID	NAME	LOCATION	HISTORY	STATUS
1	Main site	www.mainsite.com	Was created during merger to satisfy legal requirements	Still serves as main marketing channel for prospects
2	Mobile website	m.mainsite.com	Marketing wanted some content on the main site to be accessible on mobile devices	Not kept up to date as information changes on main site

CONTENT STRATEGY TOOL 8.1

CONTENT LANDSCAPE LIST

Download the spreadsheet to keep your list of relevant web properties and other content channels.

TIPS

- Include everything you think might be relevant (rather than leave something off).
- Modify the information you include to match your project needs.
- You might find content that no one knows anything about, which makes you a hero in my book. If you found it, their audiences might, too.

WHERE TO GET IT

Download the spreadsheet at www.peachpit.com/register.

WHERE IT CAME FROM

Brain Traffic (www.braintraffic.com)

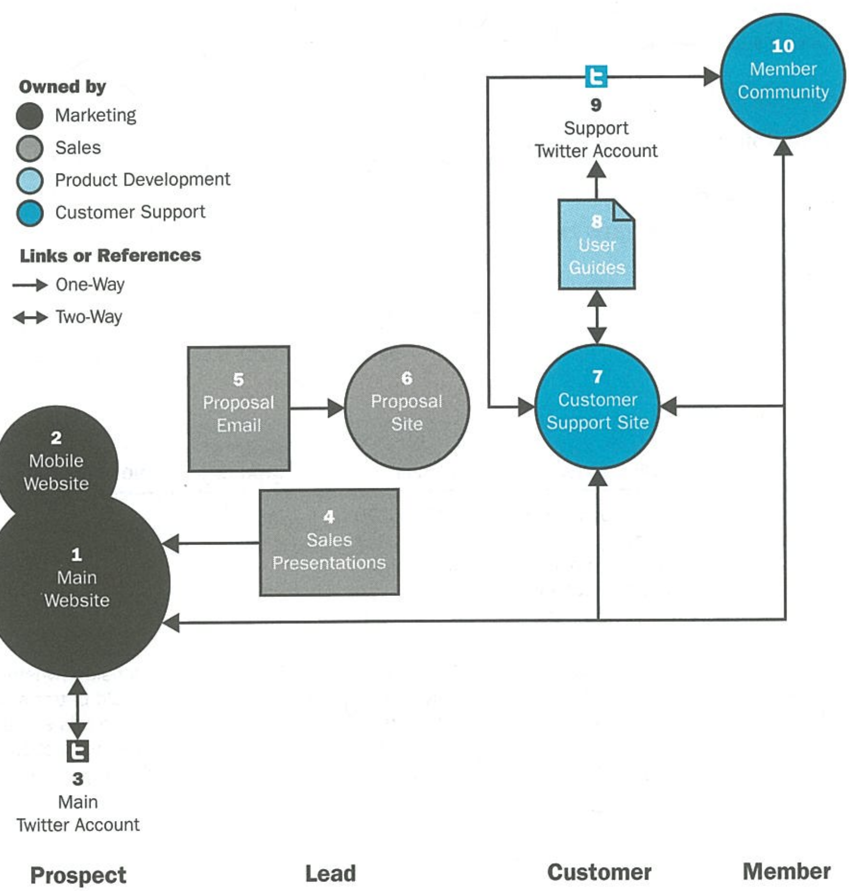
	AUDIENCE	PURPOSE	TRAFFIC	INCL. IN ANALYSIS	NOTES
	Prospective clients	Help prospective clients get familiar with our products and services before they contact us	Gets 1,230 unique visits per month	Yes	
	Prospective clients	Help prospective clients get familiar with our products and services before they contact us	Gets 400 unique visits per month	Yes	Consider whether a responsive main site would better meet business objectives since this site doesn't include all the information a prospect might be looking for and is often out-of-date

VISUALIZE THE ECOSYSTEM

Once you've documented the information that helps put all the content into context, create a "map" of the content ecosystem. The visualization is a way to sum up key information about the content, such as where it lives, how it's linked together, who it's for, who owns it, its place along the customer journey, how much traffic it gets, and what properties/channels are in scope or under consideration for your project.

Documenting all those details in one visual can get a bit complicated. So, pick the items that make the most sense to visualize and include notes about the rest. You can do that easily using the IDs you included in your content landscape list.

Here's an example of an ecosystem diagram:



Here are examples of notes you might include about each property:

1 **Main website**—The primary marketing channel, which houses a lead-generation form from which you can connect prospects with sales.

2 **Mobile website**—Contains a subset of content from the main website. Users cannot fill out the lead-generation form on the mobile site.

3 **Main Twitter account**—Used primarily to share opinions on recent events, studies, and so on that impact the industry, to drive awareness of offerings with prospects.

4 **Sales presentations**—Sales has a standard presentation that they sometimes customize for a particular prospect.

5 **Proposal email**—Sales has a standard email they send when they've prepared a proposal for a client; it is sometimes customized when sales reps have time.

6 **Proposal site**—Sales reps can generate prospect proposals created by sales. Its goal is to suggest personalization with little effort.

7 **Customer support site**—Public site customers can use for basic support questions and find user guides and other details about products.

8 **User guides**—Guides are included as a hard copy with the products and are accessible online through the customer support site.

9 **Support Twitter account**—Customers can tweet at the support Twitter account if they need product help. One person monitors the Twitter account and follows up as appropriate.

10 **Member community**—Site for customers who join the loyalty program. It has a message board where customers can discuss best practices (which are then curated into a knowledge base).

CONTENT SNAPSHOTS

OK, you now know—or mostly know—what makes up your content landscape. Let's get to analyzing, which I like to think of as taking snapshots of more-specific aspects of your content.

Remember back in Chapter 1 when I talked about writing down your research questions before you look at what's going on with your content? You'll need to do that again. Here are some of the questions you'll likely want to answer:

- How much content is there?
- What content is in what places?
- What is the content about?
- Who is the content for?
- Does the content answer the questions users are likely to have throughout the customer lifecycle and/or sales funnel?
- How does the content make users feel?
- What is the intended purpose?
- How is content connected to other content?
- Is the content clear, usable, and readable?
- Does the content contain a compelling call to action or next step?
- Is the content easy to find by users?
- Can search engines find the content?
- Is the content organized in a way that makes sense to the user?
- How is the content structured and stored?
- How much traffic does the content get?

ID	NAME	URL	REFERENCES/LINKS TO	USAGE
0.0	Home	www.confabevents.com	Confab Central page, Confab Intensive page, Confab Higher Ed page	7 billion visits per month
1.1	Confab Central	www.confabevents.com/events/central	Speakers page, Program page, Venue page, Registration page	4 billion visits per month
1.1.1	Confab Central: Speakers	www.confabevents.com/events/central/speakers	Registration page, Convince your boss page, Talk pages, Speaker Twitter pages	3.5 billion visits per month

- Is the content up to date and accurate?
- Who is responsible for the content?

That's a lot of questions. You might have to prioritize the questions you answer and/or scale the depth of your analysis based on your timeline, resource availability, and budget.

I can't tell you precisely what to prioritize or how to decide, because that's influenced by your business and project goals. I can provide some methods and tools for learning about the current state of your content once you know what answers you need.

INVENTORIES

Content inventories, which are like lists of all the content you have or are considering for your project, are best for answering quantitative and objective questions, like these:

- How much content is there?
- What content is in what places?
- How is content connected to other content?
- How is the content structured and stored?
- How much traffic does the content get?
- Can search engines find the content?

	STRUCTURE	SEO: TITLE	SEO: DESCRIPTION	SEO: H1 TAGS
	Headline, intro text, image, and text block for each event	Home: Confab Events	Content Strategy: Mission Critical. Confab is the world's best content strategy conference. Improve your work. Find your people. Expand your universe.	Content Strategy: Mission Critical
	Event title + date and location line. Event detail tabs, Headline, Intro text, Image and sub-page titles (4)	Central: Confab Events	Confab Central is the world's premier content strategy conference. It takes place each year in Minneapolis, Minnesota.	Content strategy's biggest event
	Event title + date and location line. Event details tabs, Headline, Intro text, Button links, Speaker photo, Speaker name + Title + Twitter handle + Linked talk titles	Speakers - Confab Events	Check out the smart folks who will be presenting talks at Confab Central.	Speakers

So how do you get answers to those questions? It usually involves a combination of automated and manual tasks. The output can be a spreadsheet with columns for the data you're collecting. Start with the information you can automate, and then add columns for the stuff you'll record manually. It might look something like the spreadsheet shown on the preceding page.

You can structure your spreadsheet in a number of ways, depending on how you want to analyze the data. If you want a big picture representing all properties and pieces, put everything in one spreadsheet and include columns that distinguish between a website or a piece of collateral, for instance. If you're going to analyze each type of content or property separately, put each property (such as a website or application) or content type (such as brochures) in a separate worksheet.

WEBSITES

TIP

If your site contains 500 pages or fewer, you can probably look at every page to understand structure, SEO information, related content, and so on. If your site is larger than that, run a program to do most of that work for you.

If you're looking at a website, you should be able to get a list of all the URLs from your CMS, your analytics tool, or a site crawler. The data you can get depends on what tools you use. For example:

- Your CMS might be able to spit out a list of pages based on the hierarchy of your sitemap.
- You can use many free and paid options for site crawlers that provide different information. For example, some tools grab all the SEO information (page title, meta description, h1 tags, and so on).
- Other tools identify broken links, orphan pages, and so on.
- Your analytics tool might be able to pull a URL list with traffic numbers or other data.

HINT

I'm making an assumption that you haven't done much in terms of structured content. If you have, your CMS can tell you a lot about how your content is "chunked" and pulled together. Sara Wachter Boettcher wrote a whole book about structured content, titled Content Everywhere: Strategy and Structure for Future-Ready Content *(ISBN: 9781933820873). And Karen McGrane's book* Mobile Content Strategy *(ISBN: 9781937557089) is another great resource.*

Since no one tool does everything, you might have to manually record some information. Examples include links from a page on your site to other pages, websites, applications, PDFs, and what makes up your page templates (body copy, image, siderail, and so on).

PRINT

You might be able to automate the process of creating inventories for offline content, too. Find out if your organization maintains a collateral library or uses a print-on-demand service that manages a catalog of print pieces before you try to find and record them on your own.

If you have to record them on your own, start by asking stakeholders what print collateral they produce or own. Then, categorize them in some way: by product, by audience, and so on.

APPS

I haven't found a good tool to inventory all the content within an application. Hopefully, you have a map or diagram showing all the screens and scenarios. But if you want to get a sense of what content it included, you'll likely have to walk through all the screens and scenarios and record what you find.

CONTENT AUDITS

Content audits are best for answering more qualitative or subjective questions like:

- What is the content about?
- Who is the content for?
- What is the intended purpose?
- Is the content clear, usable, and readable?
- Does the content contain a compelling call to action or next step?
- Is the content up to date and accurate?
- Who is responsible for the content?

OK, so those last two could be considered objective questions, but I included them here anyway. Determining the answers likely involves a person with a bit of context about the content and the organization.

Back in Chapter 1, I talked about content audits as a way to figure out what's wrong with your content. You're doing the same thing here, but perhaps on a larger scale, in more detail, or with a different set of criteria. (If you did a large-scale, detailed audit at the beginning of your project, you just might be finished with this part.)

The first step is still to define the attributes you'll assess, what questions those attributes relate to, and what you'll look for to make your assessment. **Table 8.2** shows the example from Chapter 1 with some different attributes.

TABLE 8.2 **AUDIT CRITERIA**

ATTRIBUTE	CELL VALUES	RESEARCH QUESTION	WHAT YOU'LL LOOK FOR/RECORD
Topic	*<Product/Service>* *<Industry Trend>* *<Help Topic>*	What is the content about?	Record primary topic; note secondary topics.
Purpose	Inform Convince/Persuade Engage Unknown	What is the intended purpose of the content?	Record primary purpose, not secondary purposes.
Ownership	Marketing HR PR Product Team	Who is responsible for ensuring the content is accurate and up to date?	Note specific person or role if known.

HINT
Download Content Strategy Tool 1.1 Audit Spreadsheet to create your audit spreadsheet and record your findings.

You're probably wondering if you need to audit every single page of your site. The answer is either "maybe" or "probably not." (I know, crystal clear.) So how do you decide? Consider the following:

- Can you get help? Perhaps content owners audit their own pages or sections.
- How much time do you have? Think about how much you can realistically do in the timeframe you have, especially if auditing won't be your primary job during that time.
- Will a sample answer your questions? On a larger site, patterns will quite likely emerge after auditing a portion of your content.

No matter what you decide, some auditing is going to be better than no auditing. If you look at the whole site, you'll have some more prescriptive and specific details to share in your recommendations. If you do a sample, you'll know what needs to be addressed at a high level and you can communicate those themes.

CONTENT MAPS

Content maps are a way to bridge the business and user perspectives. They help to answer questions like:

- Does the content answer the questions users are likely to have throughout the customer lifecycle and/or sales funnel?
- What is the intended purpose?
- Does the content contain a compelling call to action or next step?

People use the term *content maps* for many things. I'm referring to a diagram that depicts what your users want to do or know, what you want your users to do or understand, and what content you have to serve those purposes. I usually do a content map workshop activity at the same time I'm learning about my stakeholders' perceptions and assumptions about users. (I talked about that in Chapter 7.)

HINT
Content Strategy Tool 7.2 User Research Workshop Activities contains the details about facilitating the content map exercise described here.

Here's how it typically works:

1. On a big whiteboard, I write a set of labels representing the purchase path or user journey. So it might be something super simple like *Before* (engaging with you), *While* (engaging with you), and *After* (engaging with you). Or it might be more along the lines of a sales funnel like Awareness, Research, Consideration, and Purchase.
2. I ask workshop participants to go back through the user stories they wrote and write all the questions they think users would have and all the tasks users would want to complete throughout the story.
3. I ask them to work together to cluster the questions and tasks underneath the purchase path or user journey and consolidate duplicates.
4. I have participants write on sticky notes the high-level answers to the consolidated questions and the calls to action (CTA) to the consolidated tasks. They place them next to the corresponding questions and tasks.
5. I have them brainstorm what content they have that fulfills the questions and tasks in each phase of the customer journey or purchase path. Through this process, participants indentify where the gaps are in their current content.

The end result is something like this (but with tons of sticky notes and not so neat):

AWARENESS		RESEARCH		CONSIDERATION		PURCHASE	
QUESTIONS	MESSAGES	QUESTIONS	MESSAGES	QUESTIONS	MESSAGES	QUESTIONS	MESSAGES
TASKS	CTAs	TASKS	CTAs	TASKS	CTAs	TASKS	CTAs
EXISTING CONTENT		EXISTING CONTENT		EXISTING CONTENT		EXISTING CONTENT	
CONTENT GAPS		CONTENT GAPS		CONTENT GAPS		CONTENT GAPS	

USER TESTS

User tests can help you answer questions like:

- Does the content answer the questions users are likely to have throughout the customer lifecycle and/or sales funnel?
- How does the content make users feel?
- Is the content clear, usable, and readable?
- Does the content contain a compelling call to action or next step?
- Is the content easy to find by users?

I group user test types into three main categories: findability, readability and comprehension, and favorability. What categories you include in your tests depends on what you want to learn.

Let's go back to our dentist example from Chapter 7 (except now they have a live website) to walk through the test types. Then, you can download **Content Strategy Tool 8.2 Sample User Tests** to make your own test plan.

FINDABILITY

Findability refers to how easily users can find what they came for on your website. Why they came might be to find information or to complete a task.

The types of questions you might ask include "How would you go about finding the dentist's hours?" or "Where would you go to find out whether the dentist does cosmetic dentistry?"

READABILITY AND COMPREHENSION

Readability and comprehension suggest how easy your content is to digest and understand. (I really hate the word *digest* for content, but I haven't come up with anything better.)

In a test like this, you ask test participants to read a page or snippet of your content and then answer questions about what they read. So you might show them the dentist's services content and then ask them questions like "Does the dentist offer cosmetic dentistry?" or "What's the youngest patient they will see?"

TIP

There are some neat tools you can run your content through to see how it measures up for readability and comprehension. My personal favorite for a quick check is www.hemingwayapp.com.

FAVORABILITY

Favorability looks at how your content makes people feel and how that influences their behaviors. The super-simple user test from Chapter 1 is an example of a test that falls into the favorability category. To jog your memory, that's the one in which you ask people to highlight content with different colors depending on how it makes them feel.

Another example of a favorability test is to ask users to respond to two variations of the same content. You could show them a snippet about the dentist's and a competitor's patient-care philosophy or show them the current version and a revised version. Then, ask questions about how the content made them feel, what dentist they would be more likely to choose, and so on.

CONTENT STRATEGY TOOL 8.2

SAMPLE USER TESTS

Download the sample user tests for descriptions of tests (and instructions) you can use to get user insights about your content.

TIPS

- Avoid trying to do too much in one testing session. Aim for a half-hour test or series of tests with 15 to 30 minutes of interview time.
- Recruit people in the right phase of their customer journey for the content you're testing. For example, if you're assessing sales and marketing content, choose people who have recently made a decision about your offering rather than long-term customers.
- Make it clear to users that you are testing your content, not them.
- Compensate test participants to show you value their time. Gift cards are a good choice.

WHERE TO GET IT

Download the sample user tests at www.peachpit.com/register.

WHERE IT CAME FROM

Brain Traffic (www.braintraffic.com)

CONTENT CONSCIENTIOUSNESS

Now you're swimming in information about your current content, which is going to help propel your content strategy (and make you a hero). Chapter 10 will help you pull it together, along with the information you've gathered about the business and users.

In Chapter 9, you'll take a look at your content roles and processes. Figuring out what's working and not working will be key to executing the strategy you're working toward.