THECR NETWORK

Understand Content Strategy: Practical Tips and Best Practices

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SPEAKERS
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COMPETENCIES
Content & Programs

MATURITY PHASES
CMM2

TOP THREE TAKEAWAYS

Given her wealth of experience with this topic, Margot was asked to update TheCR with practical tips and best practices on this difficult-to-master topic.

1. **There are three main steps with a content strategy:**
   a. A message architecture (to align communication efforts).
   b. A content audit (to know what content is needed by first examining what already exists).
   c. A content curation process (curation filters the flood of content for the specific purpose, place, time and audience).

2. **Inconsistency is a common pain point when designing a content strategy.** Therefore, having a message architecture allows the organization to reflect back to the message that they wish to consistently deliver when interacting with consumers.

3. **Make sure someone owns the content strategy.** One of the biggest issues within organizations today is that no one owns the content strategy. It becomes a part of everyone's job and the effort is passive. As a result, nothing really happens because it is not owned by any one individual who has it incorporated as a part of his/her goals.

OVERVIEW

1. **Content Strategy Defined:** Margot shared with participants an industry definition of content strategy: *"Content strategy is planning for the creation, aggregation, governance, and expiration of content that is useful, usable, and appropriate to the experience"*. This definition has been used for the past three years or so, since the Content Strategy Consortium was convened at the IA Summit in 2009.

2. **Content Strategy is a Process:** The first step in developing a content strategy is to help the people within the organization understand what a content strategy is and why it should be funded and/or a part of their department. To do that, help them understand the benefits:
   a. A content strategy can make the work (speaking generally and with respect to the work of designers, IAs, project managers, SEO specialists, social media consultants, etc.) more efficient, effective, responsible and sustainable.

3. **Begin with a Message Architecture:** Margot always begins the content strategy process (whether it is for a print publication, an online publication, a community, a social media channel or any other communication channel) with the message architecture.
   a. A message architecture helps to align communication efforts. It is a hierarchy of communication goals that reflect a common vocabulary. The idea is to organize the terminology that the organization uses to describe their brand and the community in terms of who they are, who they are not and how they would like to be perceived. This allows them to focus on organizing and prioritizing the communication goals towards that terminology in order to obtain those qualities within the message architecture.

BEST PRACTICES

1. **Conduct a Content Audit**

   Margot stressed that the first step in a content audit is to examine the content that currently exists. You cannot possibly know what is needed if you do not first know what exists. Furthermore, once you have figured out what you have, you also need to know whether or not it is any good. In order to determine the quality of the content, Margot asks the following questions:

   a. Who owns this portion of the site?
   b. When was it last updated?
   c. What is the purpose of it?
   d. What are the different types of content?
   e. What are the different elements on that particular content type or within that page?
   f. Is everything there that should be there?
   g. Is it accurate or appropriate for the brand?
   h. Is it still current?
   i. Is it relevant?

2. **Implement a Content Curation Process:**

   Margot believes that this is an important aspect of content strategy. Accordingly, she warns that some vendors will try to sell curation tools as the silver bullet for content creation. There is a place for curation tools, but only if the curation process is already being done well. If you start with a message architecture, build on it to figure out what is good within the content that already exists. That is a good start for which content curation can then help to fill in any gaps.

   a. Curation filters the content so that the audience can take meaning from it. As such, it can answer the following questions:

      i. How can I engage with the community?
      ii. What five things should I read first?
      iii. What can get me up to speed on the news?
      iv. What's most important about this topic?

LESSONS LEARNED

- David Hobbs is a content management specialist. In his *"Guide to Website Content Management"*, he speaks to the fact that content audits help to put hard standards around content expiration. For example, one hard standard is to archive any content over a year old. It cannot be deleted because it may still be relevant for search engine optimization purposes, but it is not listed with more current, relevant content pieces. Another way is to simply ask: "Was this helpful?" The helpful content pieces then rise to the top in search results.

- One participant asked the question as to how content strategy changes by platform. He wondered if the approach to designing the content strategy was the same, i.e. building content around a Facebook brand page vs. a specific topic for an existing external community. Margot replied that the differences occur as you get more tactical with the content strategy. The early stages (the message architecture, the content audit and the development of a prescriptive content nature, etc.) will not change.

- Another participant asked Margot if she was aware of a tool that could manage all the different channels. Margot replied that she has not personally found success with any one tool. It still comes down to knowing what to do with the information, as well as having the manpower to execute it. No tool will replace a human being's ability to oversee and manage the channels. It can augment what is being heard and noticed, but in Margot's opinion all the fancy features do not replace the benefits of one insightful human being.

- Jim asked Margot her opinion on scaling a content team. In particular, what she sees as the norm within organizations. Margot replied that it varies, depending on the size of the company, the size of the community that they are supporting and the volume of content that they are supporting. She has worked with some organizations that pull people from marketing, product support, and customer service, along with someone who is a dedicated content strategist and/or copywriter.

LESSONS LEARNED, CONT.

- One participant asked Margot for her views on Storify and/or how she sees these types of platforms used in the gathering of news. Margot replied that she believes that BU Today is using a custom solution with Storify on the backend to help curate their content. They use filters to help pull in the right type of content using the right key words and then with human oversight, they pull it into their own platform to put their own branding around it. Margot is a big fan of that type of content strategy.

- The question was raised regarding endorsement of content, i.e. helping organizations to feel comfortable with the concept of curation and approving certain sources for curation when it could imply endorsement of the source. Margot replied that she has seen some companies use a blanket disclaimer within a footer or someplace else within the content that states: "Content curated from other sources does not necessarily imply endorsement."

- Margot was asked for her thoughts on how to make the most of the super users in a forum in order to leverage them as a content resource. The benefit is that this content uses the same language as the general visitors of the forum as opposed to corporate speak. Margot's advice was to pull these super users close and reward them with attention that praises their efforts. Margot offered the following suggestions:
  - Ask these super users to comment on specific ideas, themes, etc. and to initiate posts accordingly.
  - In some online communities, Margot has seen the community spotlight the posts from a particular user featuring that user on that day and/or asking them to be a guest editor for a section for a week, etc. That is an effective way to cultivate other voices from within the community.

ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS

Jim asked participants to describe their greatest pain point when it comes to content strategy:

- Working in a regulated environment.

- Two participants expressed concern with too much content and keeping current.

- Sourcing content for the external-facing community.

- Effectively present large quantities of content to community members, as well as organizing questions and searches related to content so that people can find information quickly and efficiently.

- Trying to get the right content to the right people in the right time and cadence that is useful to them. As well, to then take the content feedback and deliver it to the appropriate sources. In other words, looking at it from a closed loop perspective and trying to make sure that both sides are serving each other well.

- Trying to figure out how to incorporate the corporate strategic message across all platforms.

- Assigning content ownership.

- Understanding how to tie all the content together in a strategy that can be presented to a large global community of employees in a way that can be used and accessed efficiently.

- Working with a company culture that does not see social media as a means of communication.