

Writing effective online content



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The mere mention of writing content for their website or blog can send some business professionals off screaming into the sunset. It need not be the daunting task it appears to be at first glance, and hopefully I will be able to share some easy tips and techniques to motivate even the most awkward content writer in the making!

It is worth mentioning before we start that when we say content, we can understand this to mean text, images, videos and other media which combines to make up the elements of your webpage. In this article we are offering help on how to manage and construct the text and images on your webpage – however, these concepts and techniques can also be applied to other types of onpage content (like video).

Assess Your Website

Firstly, take a critical look at your website. Assess the objective of your website – is it an e-commerce website (i.e. do you sell a physical product online) or an information based website? What tasks are your website visitors coming to your website to complete?

Examples of these can be:

- Filling out a contact form
- Making an online enquiry
- Finding information/resources on your website
- Researching your company or products.

Once you have an idea about what tasks you think your online audience are likely to want to accomplish by visiting your website, you need to ask if this is easily achievable through your existing offering. Can your audience easily achieve what they are coming to your site to do? If not, then you may need to look at how your website is structured, and make changes to the layout and content to address this.

Website Content

The process of assessing your own website will hopefully help you to figure out what you need your website to 'say' as well as what it needs to 'do'. When it comes to giving your website a voice, you need to look at the following areas:

- What tone of voice is suitable for your company/brand online?
- Do you need a blog?
- What does your content need to convey? (i.e. what message do you need to get across within the content of the website?)
- How can you stand out from your competition?

Tone

Consider who you are hoping to speak to? Is it mainly professional business people (B2B) or are you trying to reach a consumer audience (B2C)? In the case of a B2B audience, it is likely that the tone and content of your website will need to be authoritative and professional whereas in the case of a consumer focused site, you can choose to be more informal and approachable.

You may need to consider using different tones of voice for different areas of your website. For example, most businesses can adopt a more light hearted tone for the content of their blog (and certainly for their social media pages) than that of their main website.

Blog

A blog is a website which contains posts (articles, news items and opinion pieces) displayed in a chronological order. It can be a stand alone website, or it can be integrated into your main website. It is generally updated more frequently than the other pages on your website, and is a great way to communicate with your online audience in a less formal, more personal way. In professional terms, a blog can be a great way of updating your audience on new events within your company, new product launches and interesting happenings within your industry. From a consumer point of view, a blog is a great way to build a relationship with your audience, and you can use your blog to update your audience on new product lines as well as a place to voice your opinion and communicate ideas. From a search engine perspective, Google values fresh content on your website, so a blog is a great way to keep your site updated on a regular basis.

If you don't have a blog, consider talking to your website designer about what options are available. If you don't have a website developer or designer to call on, I would suggest looking at an off-the-shelf offering like Wordpress – this platform offers blog templates which are easy to setup, and come in a wide variety of layouts and designs (some templates are free, some you can pay for).

Content Structure and Message

This is a big topic, so I am going to give you a few broad tips on how to structure the content on your page. You also need to consider that the content needs to be tailored for your user (easy to read, informative) and tailored for search engines (contains relevant keywords and links). These should not be mutually exclusive, and Google recommends writing for the user first and foremost - not for search engines.

When considering content for the web (compared to content for offline media, such as press releases or news articles), consider the following points:

1. Web users scan text – they do not read it!
2. Web users pick out words and phrases, not sentences.
3. Web content must:
 - » Have scannable text.
 - » Have highlighted text (bold font, links).
 - » Have relevant headings (not clever ones!)
 - » Have bulleted lists.
 - » Break content up into paragraphs (3 or 4 lines).
 - » Have one clear idea/point per paragraph.
 - » Have 50% less text than traditional/offline media.
 - » Start all points with information carrying words.

Try to put 'important' content first – think of an 'inverted pyramid' style of writing, whereby you start at the top of the page, giving more content towards important themes/topics, graduating down the page.

Adopt the 'F' plan – 'F' for fast (generally speaking, you have less than 10 seconds to grab the user's attention). Think of the shape of a capital 'F' and imagine this on your page.

Web users are likely to:

1. First read horizontally, along the very top of the content area.
2. Then move further down the page, and read horizontally across the content area – perhaps only as far as half way across the page.
3. Read vertically left down the whole page, more slowly than at first.

Competitive Landscape

It is important to look across the internet and review/ assess websites from within your industry - including your competitors. Review these websites in the same way as you have looked at your own, and see what other companies are doing. You may find inspiration from other professional websites which will help you improve your own offering - you are also likely to encounter websites which are lacking, so perhaps this can also be an important exercise in 'what not to do'. Pay attention to large, successful websites and take key learnings from what they are doing - how is their site structured, what kind of content are they producing, what are they doing/ saying on their blog?



Search Engine Optimisation (SEO)

As mentioned already, your content should be created primarily with your target audience in mind, not search engines. However, there are some basic elements of onsite SEO (how your webpage is structured and laid out, as well as the content on the page) which you need to bring into the mix when creating any content for your website.

Think about the following:

1. Try to use a selection of relevant keywords (i.e. phrases which you want to be found in search engines) within the body of your page content. These phrases need to be relevant to each page, and should be key to what the page is about. Think about content on a page-by-page basis, not about the site as a whole.
2. Use a variety of phrases and pepper them throughout your text, and consider using these to link to other relevant areas of your website. For finding keyword ideas, try using the Google Keyword tool.
3. Keep 'jargon' to a minimum. Think about the terms/ words that your audience are likely to use to find you in search engines (these are not necessarily what you or your company use internally). If you are doing Google paid advertising (Adwords) you are likely to have a ready source of phrases which users have actually put into Google to find you. Use this data to inform the choices you make for your onsite optimisation.
4. When you use images on your page, make sure they are tagged with 'alt text' (this is the text which explains what the image is) as this is used by search engines to help figure out what your page is about.
5. Within the code of each page on your site, there should be meta tags included for page descriptions and page title - these are the most important tags from an SEO point of view. These need to be unique for each page. For more help on this, please read our 'Guide to SEO' article.