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THE CONTENT-RICH WEBSITE

If you've read from the beginning of the book, at this point you might be tempted to think that each of the media that innovative marketers use to reach buyers—blogs, podcasts, news releases, and all the rest—is a stand-alone communications vehicle. And while each certainly could be a self-contained unit (your blog does not need to link to your corporate site), most organizations integrate their online marketing efforts to help tell a unified story to buyers. Each medium is interrelated with all the others. Podcasts work with blogs. Twitter feeds point people to other company information. Multiple websites for different divisions or countries come together on a corporate site. No matter how you choose to deploy web content to reach your buyers, the place that brings everything together in a unified place is a content-rich website.

As anyone who has built a website knows, there is much more to think about than just the content. Design, color, navigation, and appropriate technology are all important aspects of a good website. Unfortunately, in many organizations these other concerns dominate. Why is that? I think it's *easier* to focus on a site's design or technology than on its content. Also, there are fewer resources to help website creators with the content aspects of their sites—hey, that's one of the reasons I wrote this book!

Often the only person allowed to work on the website is your organization's *webmaster*. At many companies, webmasters—the kings of technology—focus all their attention on cool software plug-ins; on HTML, XML, and all sorts of other 'MLs; and on nitty-gritty stuff like server technology and Internet service providers. But with a webmaster in charge, what happens to the content?

In other organizations, webmasters are pushed aside by graphic designers and advertising people who focus exclusively on creating websites that look pretty. At these organizations, well-meaning advertising agencies obsess over hip designs or hot technology such as Flash. I've seen many examples where site owners become so concerned about technology and design that they totally forget that great *content* is the most important aspect of any website.

Thus, the best websites focus primarily on content to pull together their various buyers, markets, media, and products in one comprehensive place where content is not only king but president and pope as well. A great website is an intersection of every other online initiative, including podcasts, blogs, news releases, and other online media. In a cohesive and interesting way, the content-rich website organizes the online personality of your organization to delight, entertain, and—most important—inform each of your buyers.

Political Advocacy on the Web

The Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) is the nation's most effective environmental action organization. According to its website, [1] the organization uses law, science, and the support of 1.4 million members and online activists to protect the planet's wildlife and wild places and to ensure a safe and healthy environment for all living things. What makes the organization interesting is the vast amount of web content available on its site, the various media that its marketers deploy, and the tools it provides to online activists and political bloggers to spread the group's message. The professionals at NRDC, which was named by *Worth* magazine as one of America's 100 best charities, know that more than one million members are the best storytelling asset available. By developing a terrific website to enlist people to donate their online voices, NRDC expands the team and its message-delivery capabilities considerably.

The site includes environmental news, resources, and information on topics such as clean air and energy; clean drinking water and oceans; wildlife and fish; and parks, forests, and wetlands. In addition, it offers online publications, links to laws and treaties, and a glossary of environmental terms. NRDC delivers the organization's message via audio, video, and text and also encourages others to support the cause through giving their time and money and through reusing online content.

Throughout the site, widgets (small applications found on websites and blogs) and links are available for bloggers to use in helping spread the message. Prominent widgets include social bookmarking tools to add tags to StumbleUpon, Delicious, and Digg (to make it easier for people who use those sites to find information from NRDC). The site also offers independent bloggers and website owners virtual badges (graphical images that look like banner ads) that they add to their blog or site and then link back to NRDC to show support. For example, people who wish to help find solutions to both global warming and dependency on oil might put a biofuels badge [2] on their blog or website; the badge links to NRDC content about biofuels. The badges available include small ones that look like the RSS links found on many blogs and larger ones similar to banner ads.

"I came to NRDC from NPR initially, doing media relations," says Daniel Hinerfeld, associate director of communications for NRDC. "But because I'm in the L.A. office and we have entertainment industry contacts, I've started creating multimedia content for the site. We have a video called *Lethal Sounds*, [3] narrated by Pierce Brosnan, that was my first big taste of multimedia." The video, which has been a hit on the festival circuit, details evidence linking sonar to a series of whale strandings in recent years. To encourage people to take action, the landing page for the video has multiple widgets and tools. From this page, viewers can easily send messages to elected officials, donate money, and send online postcards to friends. Links to additional content, such as an NRDC press release titled "Navy Sued over Harm to Whales from

Mid-Frequency Sonar" and a detailed report titled "Sounding the Depths II," are just a click away. All this well-organized content, complete with easy ways to link to related information and to share content on blogs and with friends, is pulled together on the site and contributes greatly to the NRDC leadership position. And online content experts at NRDC are constantly looking for new ways to deliver their important messages.

"We created a podcast channel with broadcast-quality, journalistic-style packages," Hinerfeld says. "Our communications strategy is not just to reach the media, but to also reach the constituents directly." Hinerfeld draws extensively from his experience at NPR when he produces shows for the NRDC podcasts. "I always try hard to include points of view that are at odds with our own," he says. "I think it makes it more interesting, and it reinforces our own position. For example, when we conduct interviews with our own staff, we challenge people with difficult questions, not just softballs, much like a journalist would. Going this route makes it authentic. People don't want PR; they want something that's real."

Hinerfeld says that multimedia is very exciting because it gives NRDC an opportunity to reach younger constituencies. "I've come across people who are huge consumers of podcasts, and many listen to them during long commutes," he says. "We use this sort of content to bond with people in a different, less wonky way. We also profile our younger staff members, which is a way to personalize the institution." Many staff members have social networking profiles and use them to spread the word as well.

Within the news media that cover environmental issues on Capitol Hill, NRDC is very well known. But the site content, the audio and video, and the site components that are offered to bloggers to spread the message (and cause it to go viral) make the organization much more approachable, especially to online activists and the younger Facebook generation. The NRDC staffers are active participants in the market and on the sites and blogs their constituents read. All these efforts make their content authentic, because it is contextually appropriate for the audiences the group needs to reach.

Content: The Focus of Successful Websites

The NRDC site is an excellent example of a website that is designed to reach buyers. For the NRDC, the buyers are the more than one million members, advocates, and activists who use the site to work to protect the planet's wildlife and wild places and to promote a healthy environment.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of sites are built with the wrong focus. Yes, appearance and navigation are important: Appropriate colors, logos, fonts, and design make a site appealing. The right technologies, such as content management systems, make sites easier to update. But what really matters is the *content* itself, how that content is organized, and how it drives action from buyers.

To move content to its rightful place in driving a successful marketing and PR strategy, content must be the most important component. That focus can be tough for many people, both when their agencies push for hip and stylish design and when their information technology (IT) departments obsess about the architecture. It is your role to think like a publisher and begin any new site or site redesign by starting with the content strategy.

Reaching a Global Marketplace

In recent years, I've delivered presentations in many countries, including New Zealand, Malaysia, India, Turkey, and Trinidad. As I traveled to my keynote speeches in each of the Baltic countries (Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia), I was struck by how plugged in to the web their residents are. My high-speed connections in this part of the world were much faster than in most parts of the United States.

The incredibly successful marketers I met in each of these small countries impressed me greatly with their outward thinking. When you live in a country like Latvia, your home market is tiny, requiring you to sell your products and services internationally. It also requires that you think deeply about your buyers in the global marketplace.

Consider LessLoss Audio Devices, [4] a company based in Kaunas, Lithuania. LessLoss creates amazing (and fabulously expensive) high-end audio products and has become famous among rabid audiophiles worldwide for power cords, filters, cables, and other equipment. LessLoss sells all over the world, and its site has a deliberately global focus. The e-commerce and search engine optimization (SEO) platform is managed by Globaltus, [5] also a Lithuanian company.

The LessLoss site includes amazingly detailed information about the audio devices, together with terrific photos. For example, there's an essay on "The Concept of Noise," which details why a sound-preserving technique known as power filtering is important. After all, when you sell power cables that can cost a thousand U.S. dollars, they had better be good. (And it's probably a good idea to explain *why* they're so good.)

"It is amazing how people from such a small country can reach customers worldwide and prove to be well respected," says Tomas Paplauskas, CEO of Globaltus. "The power of the Internet gives the opportunity to reach huge markets. Just imagine how few of these amazing power cords you could sell in Lithuania. There are no more local businesses—all businesses are global."

I think there is an important lesson here. We can all learn from the successful companies in these small countries, companies that have learned to create content-rich websites to reach a global audience. And we can all reproduce their success. The marketplace is the outside world, not just your home city, state, or even country.

Putting It All Together with Content

As you're reading through this discussion of unifying your online marketing and PR efforts on your website, you might be thinking, "That's easy for a smaller organization or one that has only one product line, but I work for a large company with many brands." Yes, it is more difficult to coordinate wide varieties of content when you have to juggle multiple brands, geographic variation, languages, and other considerations common to large companies. But with a large, widely dispersed organization, putting it all together on a corporate site might be even more important because showing a unified personality reaps benefits.

"The key is the collaboration between the different business units, the corporate offices, and the departments," says Sarah F. Garnsey, head of marketing and web communications at Textron Inc. [6] "At Textron, each business has its own independently operated website, which makes coordination difficult because each is a well-defined brand that may be more familiar to people than our corporate brand."

Textron Inc., a global company with yearly revenues of $12 billion and more than 32,000 employees in 33 countries, is recognized for strong brands such as Bell Helicopter, Cessna Aircraft, and E-Z-GO (golf carts). The company has several dozen websites, typically for the individual brands, such as Bell Helicopter. [7] "Through search logs we learned that many people were searching for product and business information on the corporate [Textron] site," Garnsey says. "That was a wake-up call for us, because we had thought that people were going to the business sites for this information. So we've built out the corporate site with more content about each of the businesses." On a visit to the site, I was able to watch a video featuring the CEO of Cessna Aircraft, [8] check out a lot of great photos of the products, and read feature stories about employees such as John Delamarter, who's the program manager of Lycoming's Thunderbolt engine and who discussed his pride and pleasure in his work. Textron has a well-organized online media room, and because the company's stock is traded on the New York Stock Exchange, there is also an investor relations section on the site.

"We work with the businesses to showcase interesting things, and we try to have fresh content on the site and update it with new weekly stories," Garnsey says. "But the content is only as good as the management of the content and the processes. With a large site, rigor of process is required that many companies might underestimate. It takes coordination and management. For example, I can't make the content in the recruiting section of the site compelling unless I get the complete cooperation of the human resources department. People had grown to believe that you just throw the content at a webmaster and it all just works. But it doesn't—the days of the guy with the server under the desk are over."

Garnsey has a set of processes and procedures to make certain that the Textron site meets the needs of buyers and that everything on it works well, and she has a small

team that works with her to coordinate with the people who manage division and product company websites. "We have a content management process to make sure everything is fresh, has been reviewed, and is passed by legal," she says. "But a primary component is that we make sure that the voice of the customer is captured and built into all of our electronic communications. We work on how to draw users into the content and use the site to form a relationship with them. Even if they don't purchase something from us right away, maybe they will become interested in the company stock or in something from one of the brands like Cessna." To make sure the site follows best practices, Garnsey brings people into a lab for annual usability tests and research. "We also do an audit of all of our dot-com sites every year to make sure that all sites comply with the standards," she says. "And each year we hold a web summit of all the Textron people working on web initiatives from all over the company. We try to foster a community of people who otherwise would have no reason to speak with each other because the individual businesses don't have a lot in common."

Great Websites: More Art Than Science

The more I research websites—and I've checked out thousands over the past several years—the more I realize that the best ones unite many important factors in a way that is difficult to describe. They just feel right—as if the creator of the site cares a great deal and wants that passion to shine through. Like a sprinkling of fairy dust, the effect is important but indescribable. However, I'm convinced that the key is to understand buyers (or those who may donate, subscribe, join, or vote) and build content especially for them.

A friend alerted me to one of his favorite companies, saying, "You should check out WaterField Designs. They make all kinds of bags and sleeves for just about any device. I own several of their products, and the workmanship and quality are outstanding." [9]

The moment I reached the WaterField Designs site, I was hooked! The company and products were perfectly aligned to my lifestyle and to me. It was as if they knew me.

I'm tired of the same old black ballistic nylon bags everybody sells. I'm not interested in luggage companies that compete on price and rely on a rudimentary photo or two and some poorly edited copy about a bag's features.

I love a well-designed site that is intuitive to spend time with. I am attracted to a handmade product using natural materials and interesting colors. I relate to an outdoor lifestyle. And I'm willing to pay more for a product I love that will last decades.

Want to know a secret? It's not a coincidence when a site feels like it was created especially for you. It means a marketer somewhere did his or her job well! Creating

this kind of experience is exactly the point of understanding buyer personas and tailoring a site based on knowledge rather than a simple product pitch.

When I end up somewhere that educates and informs me with a video, a few blog posts, or maybe a Q&A with some instructive photos, I'm ready to make a buying decision in just a few minutes. And guess where I am inclined to buy? Yes, the place that educated me.

The WaterField Designs site is compelling in so many ways. Let's take a look at some of the elements I really like:

Hey Gary: The WaterField Designs founder, Gary Waterfield, is very visible. In fact, a link to his email is on every single page. In the Our Story page, we learn: "Gary Waterfield started the company in 1998 with these principles which still guide us today: Make products you can be proud of, Treat people with respect, and exercise kindness—we're all human. You won't find corporate intrigue, shareholder revolt, or venture capital drama at our modest headquarters. Instead you will find pot-luck lunches, group outings, and the occasional employee celebration."

Real-time products and real-time content on the blog: I love the fact that WaterField Designs brought its iPhone 6 and iPhone 6 Plus cases to market just hours after Tim Cook and the Apple team unveiled the products. WaterField Designs was even featured on ABC World News Tonight because it had the cases ready so quickly. And, of course, it tells the story on its blog.

Six-word reviews: Showcasing happy customers is always a challenge for any company. I love how WaterField Designs has a page with what look to be hundreds of six-word reviews. For example: "Enjoy unholstering your Mac through security.—Raymond S., Australia."

Photos: The images of the products in use are beautiful, showcasing them in a way that makes me want to buy a bunch of them. Each product has multiple product images, so you can see detail from many different angles.

Videos: The products have videos where a WaterField Designs employee, perhaps Gary himself, describes what goes into the item. The iPad Smart Case video has had almost 80,000 views as I write this. Remarkable.

I was glad to be turned on to WaterField Designs. Not only do I find the web content compelling, but I also love the products. I quickly purchased one of the bags (the Franklin Tote), and after having used if for several months, I'm thrilled with my purchase. Organizations filled with people who take the time to understand the needs of buyers they wish to reach, and then develop information to educate and inform those buyers, are more successful than organizations that just make stuff up.

Effective sites like WaterField Designs draw on the passion of the people who build them, and reflect the personality of someone dedicated to helping others. As you develop content to further your organizational goals, remember that a successful

approach is often more art than science. The content you offer must have distinctive qualities, and your personality needs to show. A well-executed website, like a high-quality television program or film, is a combination of content and delivery. But on the web, many organizations spend much more time and money on the design and delivery aspects than on the content itself. Don't fall into that trap. Perfecting that critical mix of content, design, and technology is where the art comes in. Adding personality and authenticity and reaching particular buyer personas make the challenge even more daunting. Just remember, there is no absolute right or wrong way to create a website; each organization has an individual and important story to tell.

Notes

1. nrdc.org

2. nrdc.org/badges/biofuels.asp

3. nrdc.org/wildlife/marine/sonar.asp

4. lessloss.com

5. globaltus.com

6. textron.com

7. bellhelicopter.com

8. cessna.com

9. sfbags.com