

Planning, Elaborating and Organizing Online Content

Online communication development in recent years makes the field experts give a special attention to the web strategy, which is based on concept and content quality.

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Content Definition

The online content is formed by any type of digital information included in a webpage or in other type of similar medium. The content can be text, image, graphics, video or audio. In other words, anything that can be published across the Internet, Intranet or / and Extranet.

Web Content

Web content means much more than a simple text. It contains: navigation menus, forums, games, look overs, links, images, audio, video, downloadable files, search functionality, forms and many others.

The image shows a screenshot of the TreeWorks website with four blue callout boxes highlighting key features:

- Search:** A search bar in the top right corner.
- Navigation:** A horizontal menu with items like ABOUT US, INDUSTRIES, CAPABILITIES, SOLUTIONS, PORTFOLIO, BLOG, and CONTACT.
- Links:** A list of links in the right sidebar, including 'all the white papers', 'CASE STUDIES', 'E-Logistics Application Business Solutions', 'Intranet and Extranet Case Study - Arctic', 'Vertical Markets Case Study - Vacation Home Rentals', and 'ASP Case Study - NetReal'.
- Images:** A small image of a tree in the top left corner of the page content.

The main content area features a headline 'TreeWorks creates Internet value' and a 'NEWS' section with several articles. The footer contains copyright information: 'Copyright © 2002-2006 TreeWorks SRL. Toate drepturile rezervate.'



Developing A Content Requirements Plan (CRP)

The most effective way to start the research and documenting for the web content is applying the Content Requirements Plan. This allows you to develop a content design strategy so that your web design implement will be driven by content requirements. CRP is a management-style project foundational document to guide every aspect of content, design, development and measurement for Internet projects.

Content Requirements Plan elements:

Pre-project planning

1. State content objectives in the order of priority (it can be as many as necessary). Objectives should be obvious and stated as an action (for example: “to provide services for clients”, “to create a virtual shop where people can buy products online” etc.).
2. State target audience, in order of priority and provide a brief profile of each. Who are you trying to reach? Who are your potential clients?
3. Describe the content as if it would be shown on your website. Suggest a possible navigation or organizing structure. Website standards and usability issues should be mentioned
4. List any important dates for this project, like latest tasks, approvals etc.
5. Virtual locations:
Indicate the URL of the Web presence.

6. Principal requirements

Indicate the high-level requirements for this content. This information should be general and should emphasize the final users and the results, rather than how these will be implemented.

7. Content Assessment

Include a Content Inventory, a spreadsheet which lists information such as:

- What content objects will be developed;
- The type of each content object and its description;
- Which content objects are new and have to be developed;
- Who will develop each new content object;
- Which content objects exists in some form already;
- Who is responsible for each content object;
- The level of importance for each content object.

This information can be captured here or submitted as a separate document.



Post-Project Planning

This category includes information on content maintenance and resources. It contains data regarding how the content will be maintained, what resources will be necessary, what changes will take place, how the physical environment will be set up (how the files will be named and organized in the server), how often content will need to be refreshed. Also, you should indicate how its efficiency will be measured.

Other factors / risks impacting the project

List other internal or environmental factors not included above, including a risk assessment, if necessary.

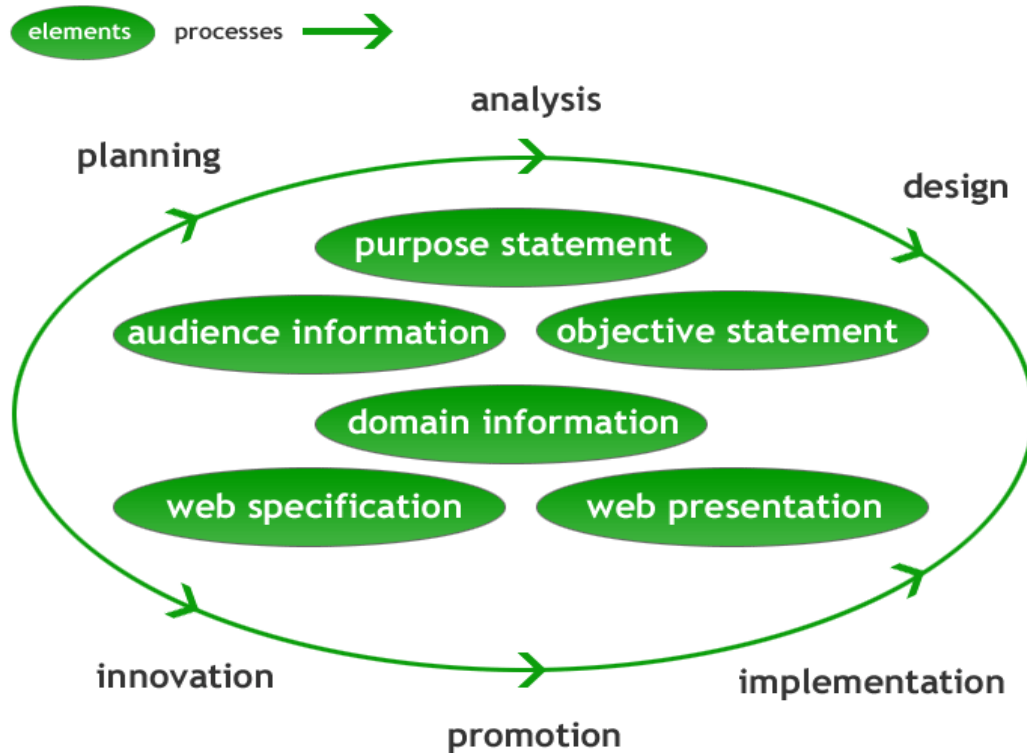
Developing Information Content for the Web

Developing Web content involves choosing the meaning, analyzing technical, aesthetic data and usability concerns. Developing information requires keen skills in planning, analysis and design in addition to Web-oriented skills in representing information in a particular medium.

This methodology involves six processes and six elements. It is based on the characteristics and qualities of the online medium and on the particular experiences of the Web users.

Six elements of information

1. Audience information is a store of knowledge about the target audience for the web, as well as the actual audience who uses the web.
2. The purpose statement defines the reason for and purpose of Web's existence.
3. The objectives list defines specific goals the Web should accomplish.
4. Information about the domain is a collection of knowledge and information about the domain / subject the Web covers.
5. The Web specification is a detailed description of the content and elements that will go into the web.
6. The web presentation is the full description about the complete technical structure (hypertext or other media) by which the web is delivered to the users.



Six Processes:

1. *Planning* is the process of defining and gathering information about Web's audience, purpose and objectives for information development and use.
2. *Analysis* means evaluating consistency and correctness of information as well as checking technical make-up of the web.
3. *Design* is the process of creating a map of the relations among pages of the web and each individual page.
4. *Implementation* is the process of creating HTML files (and associated software such as Java applets).
5. *Promotion* involves providing publicity releases for the existent and potential target.
6. *Innovation* is the continuously creative process for improvement in the web content, so that it meets the users' needs.

Choosing content

The main objective is making your website, by all the elements it contains, communicate well with the users.

Consequently you should only use content that actually adds something to the user's general experience or to the user's understanding of your subject.



Text Content

How Users Read On the Web

People don't usually read every word on a web page. Instead they scan the page, choosing the words and sentences that stand out. In a recent study, John Morkes found that 79 percents of users tend to scan web pages they come across and only 16 percent read them word-by-word.

As a result, web pages have to contain easy to scan text, using:

- Highlighted keywords (hypertext links serve as a form of highlighting, typeface variations and color being other examples);
- Clear sub-headings;
- Bulleted lists;
- One idea per paragraph (users will skip other ideas if they are not caught by the first word in the paragraph);
- The inverted pyramid style (the text is being built starting with the most meaningful information);
- Concise content.

Credibility is an important element for Internet users since it is unclear who is behind the information on the web. Credibility can be increased by using hypertext links to other sources.

Links to other sites show that authors are not afraid to let readers visit other websites.

Credibility can be achieved with the help of these steps:

- Quality Design: professionalism is always looked upon as being trustworthy. A simple navigation menu imposes respect and offers the promise of a satisfying service.
- Total transparence in the customer relationship. (For example, mentioning delivery taxes before registering the order and not after can help you.)
- Correct, updated, easy to understand content. If a website offers photos of products, these should be quality ones.
- Connecting to the rest of the internet with the help of the links. An isolated web site, that offers no link in or out looks suspicious. Do not be afraid to give other sources, because this is a sign your content is a credible one.



The Effects Of Line Length On Reading Online

The study made in 2002 by the Software Usability Research Laboratory from Wichita University, U.S.A., evaluated the effects of line length on reading speed, comprehension and users' satisfaction regarding the online text.

Twenty college-age students read articles displayed in 35, 55, 75 or 95 characters per line (cpl). The results showed that the passages displayed in 95 characters per line can be read faster. It has not been noticed any effect of line length on comprehension or satisfaction, although the users indicated a strong preference for both short and long lines.

The research used four questionnaires. One for each article, including: title, main idea and structure question. Another questionnaire was used to collect the demographic data as well as computer and Internet usage patterns.

A reading satisfaction evaluation consisting of 11 questions collected users' reactions to the format of the passages, and a post-experiment questionnaire was used to determine layout preference.

Results

• Reading Speed

Reading speed was measured in words per minute. Results showed that there is a significant line length on reading speed. Articles displayed in 95 characters per line were read faster than others: 35 cpl, 55 cpl, 75 cpl (Figure 3).

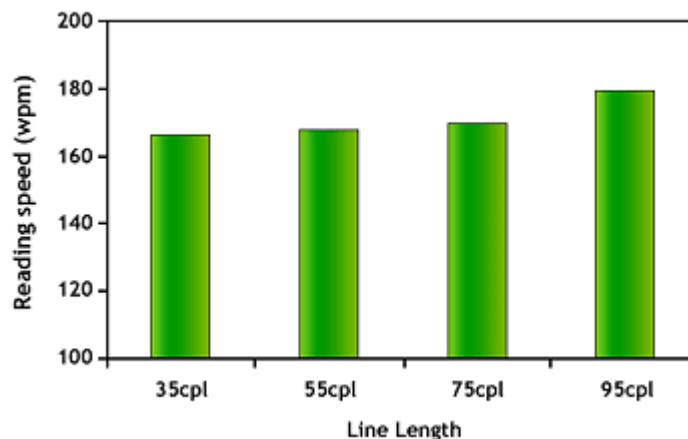


Figure 3



- **Reading Efficiency**

Efficiency was computed by multiplying the reading speed by the percent collected from the comprehension questionnaire. The result showed a relatively insignificant effect on line length. Significant differences were noticed only between the 35 cpl and the 95 cpl line, the latter being more efficient.

- **Overall Comprehension**

To determine the overall comprehension, a set of six questions was used. Results shown no line length effect on overall comprehension.

- **Questions' Type Effect on Comprehension**

Results of the study revealed a significant main effect of question type on comprehension. Participants scored significantly lower on the structure questions than on the title, main idea or factual ones. (Figure 4)

- **Satisfaction and Preference**

There was no main length effect regarding overall satisfaction. Also, there were no significant preference differences. Still, 60 percent of the participants chose 35 or 95 cpl text as the most preferred line lengths. On the other side, 45 percent chose 35 cpl texts and 55 percent the 95 cpl as the least preferred type of text.

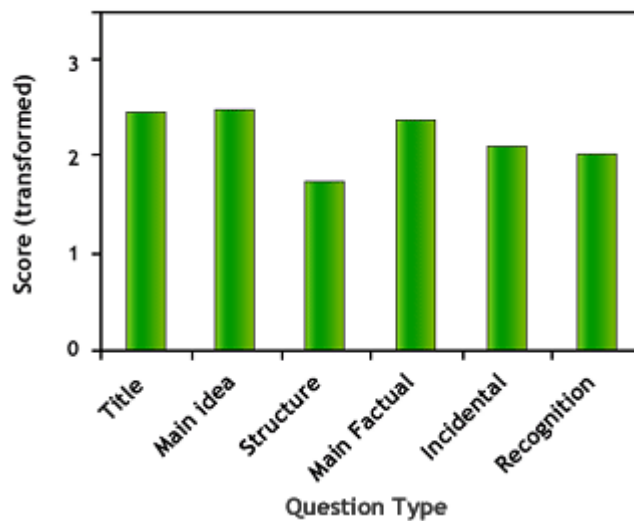
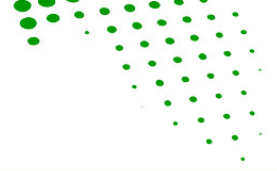


Figure 4



Comparison Of Most Popular Online Fonts

A general study made by SURL showed that most websites use 12-point fonts for most or all of their content. This study analyzed most popular fonts at this size for differences in effective reading speed and perception of font legibility.

Fonturi sans serif	Fonturi serif	Fonturi ornamentale
Agency FB (Agency) Arial Comic Sans MS (Comic) Tahoma Verdana	Courier New (Courier) Georgia Goudy Old Style (Goudy) Century Schoolbook (Schoolbook) Times New Roman (Times)	Bradley Hand ITC (Bradley) Monotype Corsiva (Corsiva)

The Serif and sans Serif used fonts represent the most popular fonts used today on the Internet. The two ornate fonts are only an example of the numerous possible types that do not fit in any particular category. However, and examination of these fonts should help determine ornate fonts' place in both performance and popularity in comparison to standard font types.

Fonts were kept at a 12-point size, exception making Agency, which was increased from 12 to 14 to have a similar height (approx. 3 mm) with the others.

Participants were asked to read as quickly and as accurately as possible passages that contained 15 randomly placed substitution words (they were not told the number of substitution words). The words have been written so as, read attentively, the context inappropriation to be noticed. The words varied from the original form; for example, *cake* was replaced by *fake*.

Results

Fonts Legibility

No significant differences resulted from the analysis of type fonts.



Reading Time

The research showed that Tahoma is read quicker than Corsiva (see Figure 5). The difference between these two font types was 40 seconds for approximately two pages of text.

Perceived Font Legibility

Assessing the perception of the font legibility revealed significant differences between fonts type. Courier, Verdana, Georgia and Times have been perceived as being more legible than Agency, Goudy, Bradley and Corsiva (see Figure 6).

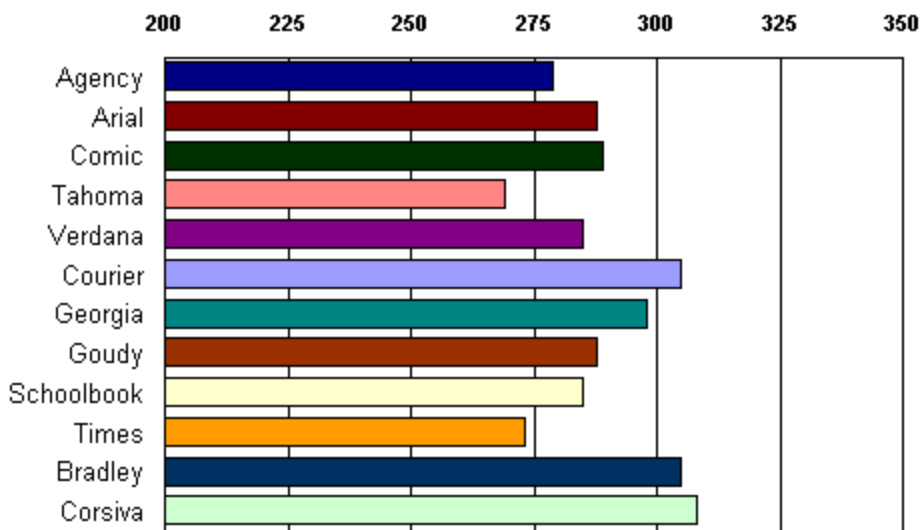


Figure 5

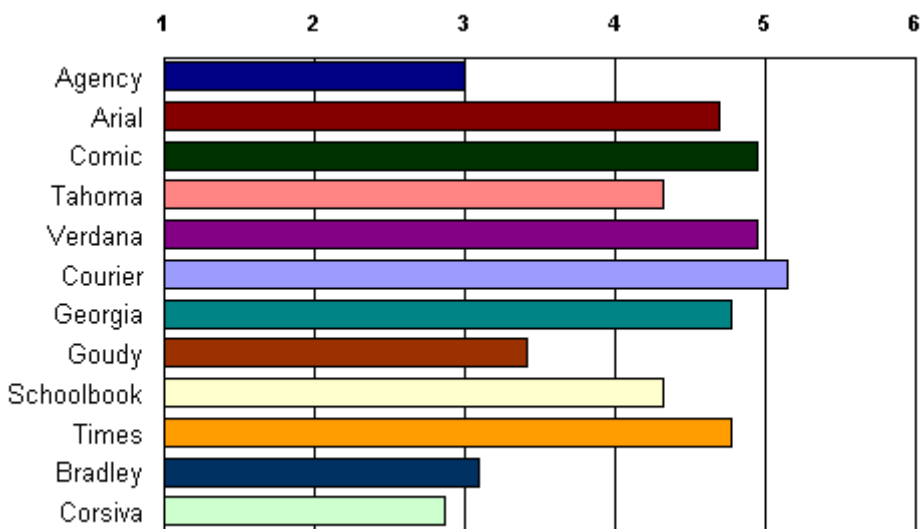


Figure 6



Measuring the Effect of Improved Web Writing

To measure the effect of different content styles, 5 different versions of the same website have been identified and developed (same main information, different wording, same site navigation menu).

The research showed that measured usability was higher for the concise version (58% better) and for the scannable version (47% better). And when the three improved writing styles were combined into a single site, the results were amazing: **124% more efficient.**

Quality Content

If you want to win online users you must offer quality content.

Quality content is the reason a user chooses a specific site and explains why he has chosen that one and not another.

It can be many things: content that is unique to your website, content which you are best at, content that is easier to use on your site than on others' websites, content that is easier to find on your website, content that is cheaper than those of your competitors.

In this context, content can be information, but it can also be a potential transaction or a functionality (search, download, order form, online reservation etc.).

Quality Content Examples:

- Information regarding the company / firm (it is supposed to be the only official source);
- Rapidly updated news;
- Inside information;
- Interesting experiences in a specific field;
- Large section of products
- Superior quality products at cheap prices.

Text Structure

Although there is no complex research about writing for web, experts notices that web content requires a different writing style than for print documents and publications. In conclusion, writing effective web copy that grabs attention and gets the desired results takes special skills and attention whether you are trying to sell products or services on a business or commercial site or if you just want to let people know the latest on your website.



1. Put yourself in the user's position

What on your website is most important for users? Focus on this. To work up an opinion on this use statistics provided by most systems, because they can establish which elements are most important for your users. Further on, the decisions regarding content of the website must coincide with the results of the statistics.

2. Use key words

When the user accesses a website, he already has the mental picture of what he is searching for, often a so-called “key-word”.

If the key-word was accessed on a search engine, it is the word that he used in its search query. If the user does not find this key-word on your website, he may quickly conclude that this content is not there (although he maybe exists there, but on other form).

For instance, a user who is searching “glasses” will not automatically click on the word “visual aids”. The use of jargon in articles or navigation bars is not to be used. It is inefficient because the user has searched for his own key-word and he will not find it. Therefore: find out what are the words your users prefer to search for. Use these words instead of your specialized jargon.

3. Write clear headlines

For a reader to become interested in an article or a website, he must know about what it is. After that, the reader will decide whether the article is relevant and interesting for him and if it answers his current needs.

In other words, a meaningful headline contains relevant keywords and is descriptive - presents the content of the article.

4. Write the article as a teaser

A teaser is composed by headline, ingress and picture and it should be able to inform the readers to such a degree so that readers who are in a hurry or read superficially do not have to read the entire article.

Those who are interested in reading more about that subject they can access the entire article, while the others, less interested, will still get the basic information.

5. Say it as simple as possible

There is never any point in writing difficult texts. Write simply and directly. To achieve this, think: “How would I explain this to a child?”.

6. Help your readers scan the page

Let the reader get a simple opinion about the article just by taking a glance at the page. The techniques to do this are: sub-heads, links, bullet points, bold face words.

Remember that these elements have to give a complete description of the article when the reader simply looks down the page. Pay attention to the fact that you can spin or twist a whole article just by choosing to make bold one word.

7. Create space on the page

Rarely a reader will read a massive block of text. Only the most dedicated readers will dare to begin upon such an article (basically, less than 5 percent). So, create space! Break text up into paragraphs, images, lists or bold face words, so that the page has an airy aspect and is resting for the eye.



8. A picture speaks more than a thousands words

Text is not the best medium to convey information. For example, when you look at a weather map you get just about everything at a glance. If you tried to convey the same information in text, the page will become far more cumbersome and confusing. So, information can be conveyed better via images, numbers, models, statistic diagrams etc.

9. Use a two- or many-layered strategy

If you must right a difficult text, make this by using two different pages. Write a simple article, which presents the main ideas and set up a link to the entire report / text for those who are particularly interested in it. This full sized version can be as well be a web-page or a downloadable material, which makes it searchable in the search engines and simple to use for those who may want to print it.

10. Watch out for typos!

It is hard to catch your own mistakes so ask a colleague to double -check your work. Remember that a misspelled word not only looks stupid, but can also confuse a search engine. A user looking for “clients” on your website will not get a hint for an article that mentions “clinets.”

Conclusion

Successful web sites must be as complete and as informative as possible. On the other hand, the Internet requires certain layouts. Statistics show that the speed of reading text from a computer is much slower than the speed of reading printed documents.

When filling up your web pages with content, make sure to use texts written by your editors.

Another tip for an effective complex web site is the ongoing web content renewal. Only a dynamic, updated content makes the website interesting for your visitors. That is why you should complete your web projects with a modern website content management system (CMS).



Resources:

Software Usability Research Laboratory - <http://www.usabilitynews.org>

Content-strategy - <http://www.content-strategy.com/>

Digital web magazine - <http://www.digital-web.com/>

Jakob Nielsen - <http://www.useit.com/>

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