

Content—What is it and why manage it?

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“Has anyone seen the latest version of the reference manual¹ that John² was working on? You know, the part that describes the new features and how they work³. I thought there was one on the server⁴, but I think somebody made some changes to it and I’m not sure I have the right one. But, I have a customer⁵ on the phone who wants to know how much the new features cost⁶ and I’m not sure what to tell him. Oh well...I guess I’ll just wing it⁷.”

Please don’t make me go and find it on...The Server!

Sound familiar? We hear it all the time, from others in our own company as well as from the companies we do business with. Fuelled by our own frustrations and fear of “The Server” and “inspired” by the frustrations of others, we set out to tackle “content” and figure out ways to effectively create and manage it.

Content: The lifeblood of an organization

In our book *Managing Enterprise Content: A Unified Content Strategy*, we describe content as the “lifeblood” of an organization and people sometimes ask us, “Well, I’m not in the business of selling or creating content. In fact, my company has nothing to do with content. We sell computers...or software, or medical devices, or food products, or television sets...” Regardless of what products or services your company sells, you ARE in the business of working with content and chances are, finding the right content is problematic for people in your organization, and potentially, for your customers, too.

What do we mean by “content”?

What type of content are we talking about? We’re talking about the content that runs your company and provides information to both your staff and your customers, not to mention your suppliers, stakeholders, and other business partners. We’re talking about the content that describes to your product developers how to develop the newest version of your product, the content that tells your employees what benefits they receive, the content that trains your front-line staff how to respond to customers who call you with their questions, the content that provides those same staff with reference material to field customer calls; it’s the content that tells your customers what your products do and how to use them and informs your stakeholders how you’re doing...essentially, it’s the content that runs your business, from hiring employees, to training and informing them, to developing product and services and their related documentation and selling them to your customers. And, virtually every department and every person within your organization touches content in some way, either as an author (officially or unofficially), a reviewer, or a user of content.

Content is contained in “information products”

We call everything that contains content an “information product”. Information products are such things as:

- User manuals
- Reference manuals
- Training materials
- External web sites (including e-commerce sites)
- Intranets
- Brochures (and other marketing collateral)

¹ Substitute the name of any “information product” here, e.g., user guide, web site, brochure.

² Substitute the name of any colleague here.

³ Substitute the topic of any “information product” here.

⁴ Substitute anywhere “stuff” is stored in your company.

⁵ Substitute anyone who typically calls you for an answer about something.

⁶ Substitute any of your typical reasons for looking something up.

⁷ Substitute your typical response, including “making it up” or even writing some new information, from “scratch”.

- Annual reports
- Newsletters
- Press releases (and press kits)
- Product specifications
- Troubleshooting guides
- Memos
- Letters

The list goes on. Pretty much everything containing “content” that is written down in some form is an information product, and with so much information being produced, it’s difficult to keep track of it all, from its creation to its distribution, use, and eventually, its demise.

Getting information products out where they’re needed

Getting content out to the right people at the right time and in the right format is critical to an organization’s success. Not only is there a tremendous amount of content to get out to a lot of different people, it may also be published in a number of different formats and for many different media (e.g., paper, the web, and wireless devices such as PDAs and cell phones).

Falling victim to the Content Silo Trap™

Further complicating matters is that frequently, content is created by authors working in isolation from other authors within the organization. Walls are erected among content areas and even within content areas, which leads to content being created, and recreated, and recreated, often with changes or differences at each iteration. We call this the Content Silo Trap™ and while organizations don’t set out to create silos, they are damaging, often resulting in:

- Poor communication and lack of sharing information
- Reduced awareness of other initiatives
- Lack of standards and consistency (different departments/people do it differently)
- Increased costs to create, manage, and deliver content
- Poorer quality content because information products may not be created according to standards or they may contain inconsistent/outdated information.

Why manage content?

Two of the best reasons I can think of to manage content are to save yourself time (and money) creating content, tracking it down, and interpreting it and to present a consistent, timely message to everyone you do business with, from your staff to your customers. By managing content internally, you also eliminate the silos that so often characterize content creation.

Information is created again and again

For example, when a company develops a new product, many different information products are required and produced by many different people:

- Product development creates a design document that explains the functionality and positioning of the product.
- Marketing rewrites that content for their product launch materials and all the supporting marketing materials such as brochures, press releases, and web site.
- The training group works from the design document as well as the product development team to create an overview of the product and how it works. Their content does not draw on any of the marketing materials because they are being developed simultaneously.
- Customer support also works from the design document and with the product development team to create a product functionality overview. They also work on their own to create these materials.

In this scenario, three groups have essentially created the same content, often multiple times to accommodate paper and web requirements. However, every instance of the content is different because it has been created by different people with different requirements in mind. The reviewers have had to review it all multiple times.

High content creation costs...and more

When content is developed in this way it not only costs the organization a lot of time and money (creating, recreating, and recreating the same content), it also introduces inconsistencies and potential errors into the various information products. Inconsistencies and errors can cause problems for customers trying to understand what your products are and what they do, before and after they purchase them. Incorrect information can also result in accidents and potentially, lawsuits. All pretty good reasons to manage content!

Managing content with a Unified Content Strategy

A unified content strategy can help your organization to avoid the Content Silo Trap, reducing the costs of creating, managing, and distributing content, and ensuring that content effectively supports your organizational and customer needs. A unified content strategy is a repeatable method of identifying all content requirements up front, creating consistently structured content for reuse, managing that content in a definitive source, and assembling content on demand to meet your customers' needs. A unified content strategy can assist you in:

- Achieving faster time to market
- Reducing your costs to create content
- Making better use of your resources
- Improving the quality of your content
- Improving the morale of your workplace
- Providing better customer service

If you want to get a better handle on the content you produce, and the ways in which you create, distribute, and store it, consider moving to a unified content strategy. Visit www.managingenterprisecontent.com. Contact us at news@rockley.com.