



Creating Effective User-Focused Content for Web Sites, Portals or Intranets



WHO SHOULD READ THIS

The audience for this series of papers includes anyone responsible for the creation or management of content rich Web sites, intranets, portals or other interactive media projects. Readers with limited background creating interactive content as well as more experienced content creators will benefit from this information. Additionally, these papers cater to content creators and managers who have experience in linear media (print, video, etc.), but are now faced with creating interactive content for a Web site, intranet or portal.

WHAT YOU WILL LEARN IN THIS SERIES

This series of white papers provides an overview of the process of planning, developing and maintaining effective content for your Web site, intranet, portal or other interactive media project. Because of the complexity of the topic, this series does not claim to be comprehensive. However, it does discuss many of the important concepts for creating powerful interactive content that achieves your goals and satisfies your users' needs.

About the Author

Timothy Garrand, Ph.D., is the author of one of the first books written on interactive content. Now in its 3rd edition, **Writing for Multimedia and the Web** (Focal Press: 2006) is available in English and Spanish. Some of this content is drawn from the book.





SERIES INTRODUCTION TO CREATING EFFECTIVE USER-FOCUSED CONTENT FOR WEB SITES, PORTALS OR INTRANETS

This series of papers is broken down into four parts. The topics follow the common sequence for interactive content creation, but can be read out of sequence as well.

Part 1: Defining Interactive Content and the Content Creation Process

Part 2: Defining the Goal and Content Needs for Your Interactive Media Project

Part 3: Choosing the Right Content to Achieve the Goal and Meet the Needs of Your Project

Part 4: Content Creation Tips for Online Text, Audio and Video

FOCUS OF THIS WHITE PAPER

This is Part 1 of the series and focuses on:

- Defining interactive content and its unique characteristics
- Outlining the process for planning, creating, optimizing and maintaining interactive content

DEFINING INTERACTIVE CONTENT

DEFINING CONTENT

In this paper, we are referring to content in interactive media, such as Web sites, intranets, portals, etc., as interactive content. Interactive content is primarily information (including numerical data), opinions and narratives. Content is presented online in a wide variety of formats, including text, images, video, animations and sophisticated online applications. Examples include:

- an online animation that explains a process
- text and still images describing a product
- reviews of a new book
- a text article explaining the mission of a company
- an online interactive simulation to teach a skill
- a recipe that can be reviewed and rated by users
- a video news story.

Content like the above is the main reason that we visit a Web site, intranet or portal. Some recent articles have floated the idea that everything is content. This would mean that an online calculator for a real estate site or the checkout process at an online bookstore is content. But these items are really applications. They may use content. They may even deliver content, but they are not content. They are applications, which

TandemSeven Case Study: Retail Web Site

TandemSeven redesigned the Web site for Giant Eagle (www.GiantEagle.com), a large and well-respected regional chain of supermarkets. This site was upgraded to include extensive content and new functionality, including personalized promotional offers, virtual cake and deli tray building, one-click shopping and recipe ingredient lists, and paperless coupons. TandemSeven created the initial content from strategy through development and smoothed the process for ongoing internal updating.



have their own design and planning issues. Similarly, online games may use content, but game design is a separate field. Likewise, the navigation structure of a Web site or intranet provides a framework for content, but the framework is not itself content. Trying to call everything content only clouds the discussion. So for our purposes we are sticking with the definition that content on Web sites, intranets, portals and other interactive media projects is primarily information, opinion and narratives presented with text, images, video, animations and sophisticated online applications.

SPECIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERACTIVE CONTENT

Our definition of content could largely be applied to linear content formats: books, TV shows, even radio programs. But to fully tap the potential of interactive content, it is necessary to understand its unique capabilities and characteristics. Projects that do not do this end up with essentially linear media online – a Web brochure or a collection of linear videos.

Planning and creating content for your Web site, portal or intranet shares some linear media skills, but also requires different skills and approaches than developing for print, video or radio. Online content has several unique challenges, including:

- User interactivity
- Chunking
- Linking
- Multimedia
- Customization and personalization
- Collaborative content (Web 2.0).

• USER INTERACTIVITY

Interactivity means that the user can affect the presentation of the content. This is the single biggest difference from linear media, such as print and video. The user can interact not merely by screen or page, but by controlling the presentation of individual objects within a screen, such as the playing of a video or the presentation of a line of text. Most new interactive content developers have a tendency to overly restrict interactivity —failing to give users adequate control over the flow of information. This is because limiting options is what most linear writers have been trained to do. In a linear video, film or book, it is essential to find just the right shot, scene or sentence to express your meaning.

A key way to anticipate users' input is to know as much about them as possible. (Understanding user needs is discussed in Part 2 of this series.) While this is important in linear media, it is even more crucial in interactive, because the interactive relationship is more intimate than the passive linear one. Knowing the audience is absolutely essential. Knowing what users consider appealing and/or what information they need will affect every element of a project.

• CHUNKING

In order for users to have adequate control over the content to select what they need, the information in an interactive project like a Web site needs to be chunked. "Chunking" is a term that some interactive content developers use to mean breaking the content into



smaller units or pieces. For example, content on a Web site might exist in chunks as small as a paragraph, a single image or even a few words, and rarely more than a screenful. This allows users to better focus on the content chunks that they need. The user can basically create their own content experience by linking to a variety of small content elements. Creating small chunks of content is another challenge for the content developer or writer accustomed to working in linear media, which deals in wholes, such as entire video productions, brochures or even books. The content developer has to create the chunks of content so that they can stand on their own and also work in conjunction with other content.

Most sophisticated Web sites and intranets, especially those with personalization, customization and a high degree of interactivity, do not have static (unchanging) pages of information on their sites at all. Instead they have a more or less blank framework of pages or templates for different sections of the site. The actual content that fills that framework is retrieved in small chunks from a database and then the pages are dynamically assembled to be viewed in a user's browser. What this means for the content team is that they have to be particularly skilled in the technique we discussed earlier — being able to create small units of content that can stand alone, but also work in conjunction with other content.

For example, the Amazon.com home page template is set up like the table below. What goes into each section of the template will change depending on the user's shopping habits and if they have been to Amazon.com before. If the user ordered toys before, the advertisements and products offered will show ads and links for toys. If the user never bought products before, then different, more general ads will be shown. The Web site content is adjusted by the server software to the individual user. These individual ads and product information are in chunks on the server, and they

AMAZON.COM HEADER AND GLOBAL NAVIGATION: YOUR STORE, YOUR ACCOUNT, CART, ETC.		
Long Menu of Different Product Categories	Wide Center Content Area Listing Products and Special Offers Separated by Headers	Small Block Advertising Featured Product Small Block Advertising Featured Product More Small Blocks
Bottom Links: Customer, Support, International Sites, etc.		



are delivered to the template and displayed on the user's browser.

As mentioned above, the key point of this discussion for the content team is that many, if not most, Web pages are not "pages" at all, but rather snippets of information assembled on the fly to display in the user's browser, as if they were a single page or screen.

• LINKING

Links are the connections from one chunk or section of content to another section in the same site or a totally different site. The simplest link is a text menu choice that the user clicks to bring up new information. Linking raises a number of questions:

- What information, page elements, screens, etc. will connect with other sections of the site or intranet?
- How many choices will the user have?
- Which choices will be presented first?
- What will be the result of those choices?
- Will the links be direct, indirect or delayed?

Decisions such as these are sometimes made for the content team by the information architect or interactive architect. However, the content team needs to be aware of these decisions and may help further the design vision for the project or provide additional suggestions. The content team also has to make sure that the relationship of the linked content to the target content makes sense when connected together, without being redundant.

• MULTIMEDIA

The most exciting online projects today go beyond text and graphics. This means that writing great prose may not be enough for the content developer — content for video, audio and animation may have to be developed. And even if content developers do not have to create directly in these media, they do need to be aware of their communication potential: how they are used in the site, and how the more static content (text and graphics) interacts with them. (The special demands of multimedia content are discussed in more detail in Part 4 of this series.)

• CUSTOMIZATION AND PERSONALIZATION

Customization involves users making choices as to what content will be displayed and how it will be displayed. For example, many portals allow users to choose the site components that will display on their home page.

Personalization involves the site or intranet adjusting the content display for the user. For example, Amazon.com will show user specific content based on past purchases. If the content developer is working on a site that allows customization and personalization, the requirements for chunking and linking are even more extreme. The content developer has to anticipate various versions of a screen that might be created through personalization and customization. This increases the need for effective content



chunking, awareness of interactive structure or linking and knowledge of users. (For additional discussion on personalization and customization, see Part 2 of this series.)

• COLLABORATIVE CONTENT (WEB 2.0)

User interaction, chunking, linking and customization all come together in collaborative content creation, often considered a component of Web 2.0. Whether it is a blog, a social network site, a product site with options to post reviews or other collaborative forms, the users themselves are now major content contributors. Depending on the site, users can edit existing content, add to it or create completely new content of all types. This creates additional challenges for projects to plan and develop content that will work with and foster this type of user-created content, while still maintaining enough control to achieve the site's goals. In some cases, user-developed content is more highly valued than content created by the site owner. For example, a recipe site that allows users to rate and comment on the recipes has more credibility than a site where all the content is created by the site owners. Collaborative content is one more important capability of interactive content that must be considered in the content planning process.

OVERVIEW OF THE CONTENT PLANNING AND CREATION PROCESS

Understanding the potential and capabilities of interactive content is just the first step. A successful content-based Web site, intranet or portal demands a comprehensive content planning and creation process. The key stages of this process are:

- Planning content (Content Strategy)
- Developing and delivering content
- Optimizing content
- Managing content (Governance)

PLANNING CONTENT (CONTENT STRATEGY)

Content is planned for a project based on business goals and user needs. Planning includes tasks such as defining needed content, content tone, content team, media formats, user-generated content and branding. Although there is not full industry agreement about the meaning of the term "content strategy", much of this stage involves strategizing the approach to content for the project. Refining content requirements, building use cases, writing user profiles, performing content inventories (audits), content migration plans and creating gap analyses are common activities at this stage. During this time, content strategists work closely with information/user experience architects and business analysts, who may create or at least collaborate on some of the deliverables, such as use cases and requirements. Content strategists should have a broad understanding of the expressive potential of all types of interactive content and formats, including multimedia and collaborative content.



DEVELOPING AND DELIVERING CONTENT

Informed by a comprehensive content strategy, the team can begin the process of actually developing the content. This involves defining the development process, schedule and development team. Once the team and process are defined, the actual creation of the content, such as writing text, creating images, shooting videos, recording sound and creating animation can begin. On many projects, researching and repurposing existing content is an important part of this process.

Closely connected to the content creation process is the content delivery process. What is the reviewing and approval process? How will content go live on your site? How will you promote new content to users?

The content developers are the creators of the content. They need to understand their particular crafts, the demands of interactive content and how their content fits into and interacts with the overall concept and goals of the project.

OPTIMIZING CONTENT

If highly chunked content is to be effectively personalized, customized, searched and utilized by a content management system, it must be optimized. Optimization includes a variety of sometimes complex tasks that cannot be fully explained in this overview. Briefly, some of the key types of optimization include:

- Controlled vocabularies, such as taxonomies and ontologies
 - A taxonomy consistently categorizes similar information and creates a hierarchical information structure, allowing users to more easily locate related information.
 - An ontology defines shared understandings of concepts, defines those concepts and relationships, and establishes a formal vocabulary of terms. Ontologies are key for knowledge sharing systems, sophisticated search functions and other advanced uses of content.
- Content tagging for content management systems and search
 - Content tagging adds metadata or additional information about the content, allowing CMS and search engines to more effectively manage and locate content. Certain situations are also appropriate for user tagging, which can foster knowledge sharing within a group and provide new insights into content relationships.
- Search engine optimization (SEO)
 - A search engine, such as Google or Yahoo, is the way that most users will find public Web sites. There are many ways to optimize your site's search engine results, and one way is through your content, particularly by using the same keywords in your content that users choose to search sites similar to yours. Effective search engine optimization can be key to the success of a public facing Web site.



- Accurately chunking content for reuse/redesign and personalization/customization
 - Earlier in this paper we discussed content chunking, which is breaking interactive content down into smaller units. Doing this effectively is another type of optimization. This is particularly important for effective personalization and customization, allowing users to assemble the various chunks of content to see just the information they need.

This list just scratches the surface of content optimization. Optimizing content requires a highly detailed individual, often with a background in library science.

MANAGING CONTENT (GOVERNANCE)

Managing content involves checking content quality/accuracy and maintaining the content after the project is launched. This includes developing a content update and retirement schedule, content reviews, tracking user response to content and other tasks. The goal is to manage content display/distribution and to keep the content fresh and pertinent. Significant user-generated content must also be monitored, controlled and responded to, in order to ensure it helps achieve the site/application's goals. Managing content requires a skilled analyst and manager who can determine ongoing content needs. Ideally, this individual has intimate business knowledge and authority to make content decisions that represent the company. Someone with authority must be in charge of the content to ensure the site or intranet presents a unified, consistent and integrated body of content to users.

IN SUMMARY

This paper provides an overview of the capabilities of interactive content and the main components of the content creation process. The remaining white papers in this series provide more details on the content creation process, starting with "Part 2: Defining the Goal and Content Needs for Your Interactive Media Project".

ABOUT TANDEMSEVEN

TandemSeven designs, architects and builds world-class business applications and portals. We specialize in creating usable, intuitive interfaces for complex global applications. Headquartered in the greater Boston area, TandemSeven has designed and developed usable portals and applications for numerous global companies, including 1-800-FLOWERS, Bloomberg L.P., Campbell Soup Company, Citi, FXall, Hasbro, LeapFrog Enterprises, Morgan Stanley, Orbitz Worldwide and Siemens Corporation.

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