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Reprint

Writing Great Content for Your Website

By Michael Stoner

What is the most important element on your website? Your content. And what is content? Content is information, used strategically. It can be text, imagery, audio, video, or interactive. For most organizations, content currently equals text. If you're relying on text to convey essential messages, it had better be great text, written appropriately for the web. But look at most websites and you'll read text that is mediocre, even dreadful.

So how can you ensure that your website has better content than those of your competitors? We offer 10 tips to help you.

1. Write for your visitors: know who they are and what they are interested in. When you write copy, envision a person reading it-maybe an alumnus you know, a prospective student you met last week. And establish style and readability guidelines. If a website's tone is inconsistent, it gives an impressions that your organization is not cohesive or professional.
2. Write great headlines. If possible, keep them under 8 words-but, above all, keep them simple and clear. Don't be clever or obtuse, watch for double meanings, and remember the core mantra of website design, "don't make me think!"
3. Surface "who, what, when, where, why": the facts should be in the first paragraph, subhead, or teaser. Let people know what they're going to get if they read further.
4. Keep copy short, simple, clear, and easy to scan. There is room on the web for longer copy, but it needs to be formatted appropriately, with subheads, anchors at the beginning, and/or broken up onto several screens.
5. Write for functionality-formulate content so that it can be easily syndicated and integrated into your website (through hyperlinking, related links, and other techniques). Write bulleted or numbered copy; use callouts.
6. Use your internal constituents to advantage. Some institutions can use lengthy profiles because people will read them [Hamilton College (<http://www.Hamilton.edu>) and Bates College (<http://www.Bates.edu>) do this extremely well]. In other cases, testimonials may be the way to go: see the way Kenyon leverages alumni and students (<http://www.kenyon.edu/x1138.xml>).

7. Be conversational. Think “you.” Avoid passive voice.
8. Use links wisely. Too many links in text interrupt the flow of the text and are distracting. Too few contextual links and your visitors hit a dead end.
9. Write great metadata. Metadata will help surface your pages on external and internal search engines—keywords and page titles are essential.
10. Edit. Edit. Edit. Then edit again.

There are reasons to break some of these rules—but do so judiciously. You can, for example, write a clever headline if you use a deck or subhead to clarify its meaning.

There is an entire industry devoted to developing great web content. Here are some other resources we recommend:

Barry Eisenberg: various columns on ClickZ (<http://www.clickz.com>); especially, “Want to Persuade? First, Delight!: “The Golden Rule of Online Persuasion.”

Gerry McGovern (<http://www.GerryMcGovern.com>). Gerry McGovern coauthored a book with Rob Norton, *Content Critical: Gaining Competitive Advantage through High-quality Web Content* [Prentice Hall, 2002], that is a great resource.

Debbie Weil (<http://www.wordbiz.com>) Debbie Weil’s mini e-book, “Top Copywriting Tips When You Can’t Afford to Hire a Pro,” is worth paying for.