Your prescription for content strategy

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What is utility content strategy?

Learn how utilities are doing content strategy. Read our report Storytelling Tips from the Experts: Insights from Content Strategy Professionals Inside and Outside the Utility Industry for advice on how to set up a content strategy discipline at your utility.

When our utility members share some of the challenges occurring in their organization, it can sound like a list of medical symptoms. Besides a headache for both the utility and the customer, symptoms often include exhaustion for customer service reps when customers call with questions about their confounding utility bill; short-term memory loss for utilities when customers cross channels and expect their recent transactions to be captured in the customer information system; and high levels of pain for customers who attempt to navigate a disjointed utility website.

I often find myself putting on a figurative stethoscope in these cases, trying to uncover the cause of these maladies. As I ask probing questions, I finally get to the root of these negative manifestations.

“Can you tell me anything about your content strategy?”

In almost every case, this question triggers a chorus of crickets to emerge from the shadows. And, after this musical interlude, I’m always taken aback by how unsure people are of their answers.

“Well … we make sure we use proper grammar.”

“Our strategy is to produce content so that people can find what they want.”

“We just try to match our brand voice.”

In all of these responses, I hear tactics that don’t tie to a holistic and well-thought-out strategy. In the book Content Strategy for the Web: Second Edition, authors Kristina Halvorson and Melissa Rach outline components of a content strategy more eloquently than I ever could. They say:

> Content strategy:

- Defines how you're going to use content to meet your business goals and satisfy your user's needs.
- Guides decisions about content throughout its life cycle, from discovery to deletion.
- Sets benchmarks against which to measure the success of your content.

It's worth noting that in this case, content refers to everything the utility puts out for customers to see or interact with. Content includes bills and inserts, the utility website and subsites, social media accounts, interactive voice response system, automatic emails, FAQs, applications, and marketing messages. All of this content needs a strategy to inform the right tactics for success.

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There's no magic panacea for ailments caused by a lack of strategy, but the first prescription is to define who you're creating content for. You'll probably end up with a list of 800 or so different personas you're trying to engage. Your organization will have to not only truncate this list but also prioritize the most important persona you want to delight with all the information you put in the marketplace. And speaking of all that information, your utility will also need to audit your content, determine where information lives, create inventories of your web pages, identify topical gaps and overlaps, set up processes and workflows for creating and managing content, and assign people to refresh or kill your material.

Once you know your current content landscape and who you're trying to serve, it's time to create your core content strategy statement. To do this, assemble a team, get aspirational, and play Content Strategy Fill-in-the-Blank (a special shout-out to Meghan Casey at the content strategy agency Brain Traffic for inspiring this exercise with her blog Keep Your Content On-Strategy with This Single Statement). Print the Mad Libs-esque image below and fill in the blanks with information on your goals.

Fill-in-the-blank content strategy statement

If this still seems a little fuzzy to you, we've created an example below for a fictional cat video company.

Video Purrrfection's completed content strategy statement

E Source is launching its own content strategy initiative, so we're in this with you. In the comments below, let us know if and how you're managing your customer-facing information. And we'll keep you posted on our progress!

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