

CONTENT STRATEGY AND DESIGNING FOR RELEVANCE

A COLLECTION OF INSIGHTS
FROM **SURGE** OPTIMISM



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INTRODUCTION

The following pages house the results of an industry-wide virtual collaboration.

SURGE Optimism assembled association professionals from across the globe to harness collective knowledge, through a virtual conference focused on transformative ideas and designed to maximize social learning.

Attendees could not only hear from speakers, but converse with them in real time and contribute their own thoughts. We have now assembled some of the best insights from these conversations into a body of knowledge for the benefit of the entire association community.

This eBook delves into the session, *Content Strategy and Designing for Relevance*. It includes themes from the speakers' conversation, snapshots of ideas from guest speakers, contributions from attendees, links to further resources, and more.

Thank you to all who participated – and if you missed it, go to the **SURGE Optimism** [event page](#) to watch all the sessions for free, at your leisure

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01

FEATURED SPEAKERS



Hilary Marsh
President and Chief Strategist,
Content Company, Inc.

Hilary Marsh helps associations get better results from their content by improving their practices for content creation, governance, management, and promotions. Content Company's clients include the American Bar Association, Endocrine Society, National Association of Convenience Stores, Institute of Food Technologists, and Florida Realtors.

From 2005 to 2011, Hilary oversaw the National Association of Realtors' website and created the association's social media strategy. A leading content strategist since 1999, she developed and taught the first graduate-level content strategy courses for the User Experience Design Masters program at Kent State University. She is also a frequent speaker at national and international conferences.





Carrie Hane

Principal Strategist, Tanzen LLC

Carrie Hane is the founder and principal strategist of Tanzen, which provides content strategy consulting and training designed to change how organizations approach content. For nearly 20 years, she's alternated between in-house web content lead and consulting, putting together cross-functional teams and creating processes that stick while untangling information to make it usable and ready for the next frontier. She is the co-author of *Designing Connected Content: Plan and Model Digital Products for Today and Tomorrow* (New Riders, 2018). When not taming content, Carrie tries to tame her two boys. Content is easier.





Dave Martin

Director of Marketing, American College of Radiology

Dave Martin is the Director of Marketing at the American College of Radiology. He is a digital marketing expert with a unique combination of association marketing experience and for-profit CMO experience - and a track record of delivering real results. Dave served as the Chief Marketing Officer for Aptify (an Association Management Software company) from 2015 to 2017 and before that he was the Vice President of Marketing & Content for the Electronic Retailing Association (ERA) from 2009-2015. Earlier in his career, Dave worked in global telecommunications marketing, product management, and product development both in the United States and Europe. He spent two years in Sweden, one year in Belgium, and three years in Spain. Dave has a BA from the University at Buffalo, an MIA from Columbia University, and an MA from the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in Leuven, Belgium. Dave is fluent in Spanish and enjoys photography, Red Sox baseball, and drinking wine in his spare time.



02

**THE BEST CONTENT
IS CONNECTED**

What's the best strategy to make your association's content pop?

BY HILARY MARSH

Content strategy helps ensure that your association creates useful, usable, appropriate, effective content. There are several principles of content strategy:

- The content has to be **relevant** to the people who are accessing it.
- It has to be **usable**, allowing the audience to accomplish their goals.
- It has to be **appropriate** for their level of interest and experience.
- It has to be **effective**, meaning it achieves your organization's goals.

There is one more important concept to add to this list: connection. **The concept of connection is at the core of everything an association offers.** Every association has a core set of topics it works on that transcend and cut across all offerings – advocacy work, publications, original research, courses, event sessions, and much more. Those topics serve to link the organization to the industry it serves – and if the organization operates effectively, they can be a lens through which the association sees all of its work.

When an association adopts a holistic, organization-wide content strategy, its content can become connected both to the organization's strategic goals and to the audience. Ask these core content strategy questions for each and every piece of content your organization publishes:

- Who is the audience for this content, and how does it connect to those people's pain points or needs?
- What are the specific, measurable business goals for the program or initiative that this content is about, and how can this content help that program achieve its goals?
- What other content is the organization producing on that same topic or for this program?

Importantly, making sure that content works requires content governance, including consistent processes and clear roles. We must apply this intentional approach to all the content that the organization produces. **Almost all outward-facing association departments create content – that’s how our work gets out there in the world.** We need to come together and have standards across departments about how content will fit together, and who’s in charge of deciding where it all goes.

Creating this kind of collaborative environment requires rethinking people’s performance measures and including content responsibilities in their job descriptions. Yes, **content strategy is a HR issue, as well as a change management one.** If people are not rewarded for collaborating, they will not be inclined to collaborate. Make sure their performance will be measured on the effectiveness of their content, and that they have the time and skills needed to make that happen.

From the Chat - Data on Our Minds

Data can tell us so much if we choose to listen.

“When we looked at the data for our website, we realized that our traffic came more from prospective members and media rather than our members, who typically follow direct links we include in our communications. We’re working on revamping the entire content structure to better serve visitors’ needs.”

— Dee Marsden —

“How many associations like ours, have data analysts who could sit back and analyze all this data that is out there, or could be retrieved about our members/constituents? Not many. Yet, most will over invest in traditional roles like accountants or meeting planners.”

— Harry Rothmann —

03

A FOOLPROOF METHOD FOR GETTING YOUR CONTENT CHAOS UNDER CONTROL

BY CARRIE HANE

Associations are content machines. My work revolves around helping them get their content chaos under control.

The Mission

This starts with some self-reflection. Why do people join associations? Why were they formed? There are so many reasons: to gather people around the discipline, to build knowledge and grow the profession, to advance it, to advocate for it.

We have so much free content and we're blasting people with so much information—sending it too often and through several communication channels. We need to reconnect with the roots of why people need it in the first place: the domain around which the association was formed, the fields in which people are practicing or studying.

These roots get lost in either transactions or member recruitment and retention efforts. People will grow within the organization and become more active after buying in, because they care about the domain and the advancement of it. They want to contribute to it and they want others to learn about it. Create that connection in the content. Start at the foundation: What is our mission? Grow content from there.

The Structure

The domain model provides a structure and a foundation. From there, a content model for the entire organization emerges — not just that you can use for your website but for the whole organization.

Let's say your domain is civil engineering. Engineers build projects or design projects. There are specialties within that. The domain is going to include things

like projects, and engineers, and different types of locations where different types of engineering happens, like earthquake-prone areas, tsunami-prone areas or tornado-prone areas. Think about how all of those specialties are connected.

You can create a domain model of all those objects within that subject area. You can create taxonomies and controlled vocabularies that everyone's using across all your systems. Is this content about a certain specialty? Is it about a certain engineer who was influential? Is it about a particular region? Connect and cross-reference pieces of content around those types.

To create a content model, start with asking what type of content an item is. Define attributes and break it down into the smallest chunks so that it is readable by humans and computers. Using small chunks enables artificial intelligence and everything in the semantic web that Google is moving us towards. People expect personalization. By dividing things up into their smallest atoms, you can mix and match them on multiple web pages, on social media, and in emails. It can go anywhere and it can be findable.

Most content management systems (CMS) will support structured content as defined in a content model. Too often people end up with a title, a body field, and a keyword. That's not structured content. We need to break up the body to set it free. Content that gets trapped in the body is only single purpose. We need to separate it into types so we can reuse it anywhere.

You might have a big chunk of text that is the body, like an article. You can separate the introduction so it can be used differently. That's why you would prefer the smallest pieces possible. You can have a summary, a short description, a medium description and a full article, then reuse that information throughout your site in different pieces.

The Technical Aspect

The visual representation should be separated from the content it contains. Some people might have heard about the term “headless CMS.” These are newer systems or newer ways to use some of the existing systems. A headless CMS gets rid of the display layer altogether. Your code – your HTML, CSS, Javascript - is all stored somewhere else while the content is stored in a repository. Some more advanced content organizations are starting to use this kind of CMS because there are so many places their content has to go. Some people get advanced and create different patterns within a body.

When you use a structured model, you inherently build a topic-focused and discoverable menu of content, which helps people inside and outside of your organization to find what they need.

From the Chat - The Power of Planning

Keeping focused and effective is difficult without planning ahead.

"When I've noticed content creep, it's often because there's no plan in place. There are too many people involved, too many messages being combined—and the too-often, "Our registration is low, we need to post this on social media and include in emails.""

— Aldo Maragoni —

Q:"How does content strategy deal with "fires"? A lot of this takes time but all too often our organization is dealing with what's important for the day and we lose any strategy."

— Emery Wolfe —

A:"That is a planning issue -- we need to be sure to leave some unscheduled time, and also unscheduled "real estate" space on the home page, e-newsletters, and social media schedule, knowing that there will be fires."

— Hilary Marsh —

04

UNDERSTANDING THE BUYER PERSONA

Get to know your audience and deliver the content they want and need.

BY DAVE MARTIN

What keeps your members and sponsors up at night? Does the content you provide target their concerns and help them sleep more soundly?

Associations tend to speak about “the association” as an all-encompassing whole, without thinking about the audience on the other end of their communications. We can make content more relevant for audiences by understanding the buyer persona. **Personas are essentially semi-fictional representations of your ideal member**, prospective member, exhibitor or sponsor – anyone you’re trying to appeal to.

(An aside: Sometimes people get uncomfortable with the term buyer. Why call them buyers? The bottom line is that our members are buying from us on a regular basis. They expect a good customer experience. In order to take this seriously, we can embrace language like “buyer”, “sales” and “revenue,” instead of treating them as dirty words. **We can look to for-profits for best practices in technology and strategy, while keeping in mind that membership organizations are unique.**)

Associations heap a lot of focus on communications. The content of these communications is all about what the association is doing and what the association provides. Email is used to blast information to everyone, as if everyone needs the same thing.

I believe we need to shift our marketing strategies away from a “spray and pray” method, sending out a general message and hoping that a few people take the bait, and **move towards a focus on personas, using data and marketing automation tools like Hubspot to guide people through a truly valuable buyer’s journey.**

One tactic I've tried when developing buyer personas is conducting interviews over the phone. When you've done enough of these interviews, you can refer back to the transcript and see patterns emerge in the salient points from each conversation. **Look for their triggers.**

For example:

"Why did you decide to become a member?"

"On the day you did/did not renew your membership, what was going on for you/your organization/your business? What was keeping you up at night?"

or

"What were you looking for/thinking about the day you decided to register for this webinar?"

This helps you find out how your buyer makes decisions. Then you can create content and messaging that will go to the core of that decision-making process. **It will be personalized and it will resonate with them.**

At the American College of Radiology, we divide up these interviews between our different audiences: those members who are residents, those who are students, those who are further advanced in their career. We then find out how to speak their language. **This is the first step towards much more specific and refined personalization, which can be achieved using technology that tracks an individual's interests over time.**

From the Chat - Remembering Who Is the Priority

Having the end user in mind is essential to strategizing.

"Personalization is definitely the future of website content in my mind - collecting data on a user, and feeding them content based on their browsing history."

— Harry Rothmann —

"Making the connection to back to when members join is great, but when you get negative feedback, it needs to be listened to and acted upon. That generally is where associations fail."

— Jennifer Moulton —

""Buying" isn't always about money.. you're also buying their time and attention."

— Lauren LeMunyan —

"A lesson we're learning at my organization: content strategy should be organized by the end user's expectations, not necessarily the department structure of your organization."

— Emilio Arocho —

05

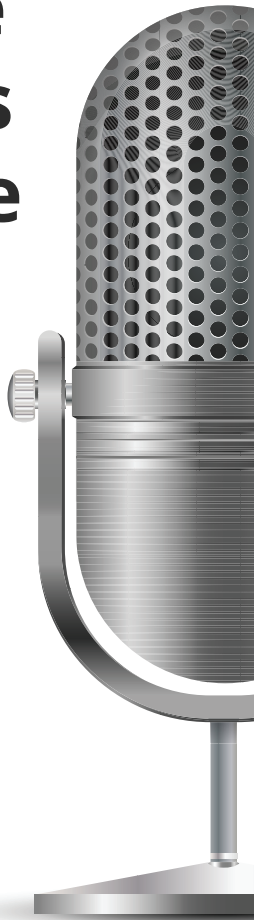
FURTHER RESOURCES

During the live chat, speakers and attendees alike chipped in with their tips for further reading and resources about content strategy and designing for relevance. We've compiled them into a list here.

- [Article](#): Google releases speakable markup for news publishers interested in Google Assistant
- [Article](#): Topic Clusters: The Next Evolution of SEO
- [Resource page](#): Bite, Snack, Meal Resources
- [Article](#): The Bite, The Snack, And The Meal: How To Feed Content-Hungry Site Visitors
- [Products/Services](#): Tools and Trainings for Digital Marketers
- [Online Services](#): Impact - Inbound Marketing Strategy, Advice, and Agency
- [Company](#): Hubspot - Internet Marketing Company
- [Company](#): Tanzen - A content strategy company that offers training and consulting
- [Company](#): Content Company - Digital & Content Strategy Consulting for Content-Rich Websites



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