THE KINGDOM OF CONTENT IS AT HAND

NOW WHAT?

BY KATHERINE GOTTHARDT

contents

Content isn't king, it's the kingdom.

-Lee Odden

We're All About Content

Here at All Things Writing, we're a little obsessed with content. It's where we live, the Kingdom of Content. And so does everyone else on the web and off. The world has never been more content-dependent, which means you need to be part of the royal family.

Website, blog, brochure, white paper, book content — you name it, we love to do it. Our approach to creating standout content involves industry best practices, client involvement and a passion for finding that creative slant you crave. We've compiled just a few of the things we focus on before publishing top-notch content to give you an online edge.

Who Cares About Content?

There's this thing that sometimes happens when you're developing a website. You're laying out pages and picking plugins. You're looking at widgets and forms. You might get so into it, you forget there's something equally as important, something you probably don't do often or very well. Content creation.

Now content can mean a lot of things, but we're going to talk about written content (often called copy). While graphics and videos are great, without words on the page, you're a fallen knight in the Kingdom. And it's not just because we need fodder for SEO. It's because we as people — even though many of us have short attention spans — still read. And we don't want to read garbage.

43% ...of people admit to skimming blog posts.

96% ...of B2B buyers want content with more input from industry thought leaders.

53% ...of your competitors' marketers say blog content creation is their top inbound marketing priority.

30% ...only 30% of B2B marketers say their organizations are effective at content marketing.

47% ...of buyers viewed 3-5 pieces of content before engaging with a sales rep.

90% ...75% of blog views and 90% of blog leads come from old posts.

6-13 ...titles with 6-13 words attract the highest and most consistent amount of traffic.

28% ...on average, B2B marketers allocate 28% of their total marketing budget to content marketing.

-Hubspot and the Content Marketing Institute

Want to know what we're reading (besides this sentence)? Have a look before you start writing.

Titillating titles

When was the last time you jumped into an article, blog or book without reading the title? Has it EVER happened? Most people read titles. We're taught to do it from a young age and we quickly learn what interests us and what looks like it might be a snoozer. So good titles count. Don't ignore them.

Helpful headings

Like titles, headings hint at what's to come. They also offer a way for readers to identify what's important. Maybe you're in a hurry and don't have time to read the whole article. Headings guide you to the information you're looking for. When writing content, don't forget the headings.

Beneficial bullets

Bullets have become a mainstay in website content. And for good reason.

- They allow readers to skim more easily for main ideas.
- They maximize simple, short, easy-to-read sentences or phrases.
- They use white space to visually draw attention to themselves, making ideas stand out.

Normal numbers

While you wouldn't necessarily want numbers on your homepage, in a blog or article, they make sense. Here's why.

1. They show the reader immediately how many main points are in the section.
2. They tell the reader how much time they'll need to invest reading.
3. They use white space like bullets do to draw attention to particular ideas.

Perfect paragraphs

What's the best length for a paragraph on a website? The short answer is "short." But not too short all the time. See, there's an argument out there that a paragraph should only be one sentence because it's easier to scan.

But that's not true.

Because when you do this, everything runs together.

And there's no good use of white space, like there is with bullets.

And nothing stands out as really important.

And we're not taught to read this way.

So don't do this.

Unless you're writing a poem.

In that case, go for it.

Takeaways

So what should you remember the most about this blog?
- Readers want quality content.
- Readers want interesting content.
- Readers have no patience.
- Readers have no time.
- Readers skim.

Reaching Your Readers

Let's continue to focus on your readers and think about how they absorb your content. It's pretty common knowledge that mainstream news is written at a middle school reading level. And for those of us in the content development and website development industries, it's also common knowledge that website content is meant to be written in easily digestible chunks.

Plugins like Yoast not only assess SEO, they judge readability. Start writing long sentences, and you get dinged by Yoast until you simplify. Some consider this "the dumbing down of America." But is it really? Even our government requires us to write in a way that the majority of people understand. You want your followers to get your message, so be sure to write at the appropriate level.

Here are four things we consider when writing website material, blogs, white papers, articles and any other content.

Readers don't need stupidity. They need simplicity.

It's about the readers' needs.

Readers don't need stupidity. They need simplicity.

Any good content writer knows that no matter how sophisticated they might be, it's the audience that matters. Who are the people visiting the site, reading the blogs, requesting white papers? What will appeal to them? Do they need a "translator" to break down technical or industry-specific language?

Writers should understand all this before they ever take on an assignment. If that audience has specific needs, such as the use of simple language, short paragraphs and acronyms spelled out, that's what the content writer needs to produce.

It's about the readers' time.

A side order of more hours in the day? Yes, please.

Most readers don't have much time to invest in a single web-page or article. That's why word economy is so important for content writers to learn. Get the main ideas in. Get the most important details in. Good content writers won't glaze over the necessities, but they also won't spend precious words on ideas that don't communicate what the business or the potential clients — the readers — really care about.

It's about the readers' attention span.

Sorry. I wasn't paying attention.

In the digital world especially, it's hard to get and keep readers' attention. There's just too much information to take in. So writers need to make sure they catch a reader's eye and hold it as much as possible. Tools like Hotjar and Google Analytics can pinpoint which articles or sections capture more readers. Hotspots, click-throughs and bounce rates are all useful pieces of information.

Sorry. I wasn't paying attention

Knowing which blog topics get the most reads, how far down visitors read and how long they spend on a page can help writers plot editorial calendars and refine interesting, thought-provoking topics.

It's about the reader's experience.

Content creation is a visual art.

If you've ever gone to a website and have seen long paragraphs, few graphics and even fewer breaks, you might have said "no way" and moved on to the next site. It is imperative that content developers know how to use headings, bullets, numbering and paragraph structure that will attract, not deter, readers. It is also important for writers to have at least a basic understanding of layout. Experienced content developers work in conjunction with web developers to perfect visual presentation and ease of reading through organizing text.

Watch that behavior.

The digital era demands not that content developers assume ignorance or carelessness on the part of readers, but that they acknowledge the age of technology and how it impacts the behavior of potential clients. By understanding these cultural changes, writers can still produce a quality, meaningful product that caters to readers in any industry. Go with writers who have the experience, drive and talent to meet what the market demands.

Linking Up: Are Your Links Spreading Rumors About You?

Whether we are posting links to social media or linking blog content to a page on our own website, there's no doubt about it. Links are necessary when it comes to establishing credibility and promoting a brand whenever we engage in content development and marketing. But what are we linking to, and what do our choices say about us?

It's easy to make the mistake of linking carelessly. In our hurry to support our arguments, provide something entertaining or just switch things up, we sometimes link to articles, videos and graphics that we might not have if we had taken one more minute to examine the source. In doing so, we misrepresent ourselves.

It seems silly, right? Most of us, after all, understand what will help our brand and what will hurt it. But sometimes, we overlook the details. And as we know, that's where the devil lives.

Given the vastness and complexity of the oft-confusing content world, we at All Things Writing find it helpful to use guidelines when selecting linkable material. Here are some basics that should keep you out of trouble and help you promote your business effectively.

Check the URL

This is the number one rule to follow, even if you ignore the rest (which you shouldn't). Don't link to sketchy sites or sites with URLs that come up as potential security risks. You can check a URL's safety by using this tool from Google. Also look at the URL's name. Some URLs, even if they are attached to valid sites with decent content, can be unprofessional, inappropriate or downright offensive. Your readers just might look at the URLs.

Check the validity

"If it's on the Internet, it must be true." Well … no. Don't assume anything is true without researching it further, especially if you are posting about something outside your area of expertise. Compare and contrast what different sites have to say on a particular subject. Use a credible site such as Snopes to avoid spreading hoaxes, erroneous information and urban legends.

Check the ads

If you are linking to a website or video that is sponsored by ads, be sure the ads are aligned with your sense of appropriateness and your intent. For example, you don't necessarily want to link to a site advertising fast food when you're promoting diet and exercise (unless you're telling your audience what NOT to eat). Or if you're blogging objectively about a product, you might not want to link to a site that has political ads, as these can be controversial and distract your audience from what you are trying to accomplish. Remember, some people could assume that not only are you endorsing the source, you're endorsing the ads.

Check the wording

If your source's content is overly dense, vague or confusing, avoid linking to it. Highly technical terms, acronyms and exceptionally long sentences can be turnoffs. Don't forget the point of linking is to support your ideas and brand, and that can't be done when what you are linking to is incomprehensible. Clear, concise, well-thought-out content is always the best choice.

Check the tone

Tone is the way a content creator expresses attitude. Do you hear extreme emotionalism in the content creator's approach? Does that emotionalism support or contradict what you are trying to say? How about humor? Is the humor appropriate to the topic? Don't ruin your own reputation over someone else's tone.

Check the mechanics

If you find a site or graphic that has good information but also has grammatical, spelling or typographical errors, don't use it. Many readers pay attention to such things, and you don't want to be connected with a source that has less than professionally written content.

Canned Content? Google Hates It and So Do Clients

You may have recently spent hours of your time, paid a pittance for your website content or put up a new franchise post. Are you now wondering why the traffic hasn't come? "If you build it, they will come," right? Wrong. There's more to it than that.

Google the first couple of sentences of your page. Then tell us how many other sites are using the same content. If it's on more sites than yours, then you've got a problem with canned content. Google will penalize you for using it. And so will clients.

The Google Gods are real. And they know how to read.

We've shared before how important it is to please the Google Gods. Over two-thirds of all internet searches are done through Google. That means if you fall out of favor, your website traffic will fall. You can publish blog after blog on your website, but if the content is identical to any other content on the "interwebs," Google takes action by taking no action. Google is passive aggressive this way. It simply won't send searchers to your site. Why?

In the past, site builders would just copy whatever content was out there to stockpile keywords for SEO. Search engines would refer readers to sites trying to sell a product when the content had nothing to do with the keywords. Google decided this was bogus (never mind that copying content violated copyright laws) and not a great way to treat internet searchers (yes, we're giving Google some credit here). Nor was this the best way to use algorithms if they wanted to be known as a credible search engine. So they found a way to deter that kind of obnoxious behavior. Hit the copycats where it hurt — in traffic that might translate into conversions.

Your clients are real. And they know how to read.

When potential clients search, you can bet they notice duplicate content, even if they don't immediately recognize it as redundant. While they might not be literary critics, readers are influenced by what you are saying and how you say it. If you've got duplicate content, nothing sets you apart from your competition. There's no unique value proposition. And most times, even if the canned content is grammatically correct, it's dry. No one really wants to read dry articles or boring website copy, so their mind wanders, they skim more and don't bother to read all the way through. They leave your site after a few seconds or short minutes. This increases your site's bounce rate. And that's bad.

And they know how to read...

Cause and effect are real.

Here's where Google's and readers' responses to duplicate content intersect. If you have duplicate content:

- Google sends fewer searchers to your site, which means you get less traffic and fewer people reading your content.
- Google will label your site as having less site authority, which means even less traffic is sent your way.
- Your few searchers read less of your content because it's dry or poorly written, causing a high bounce rate.
- Google sees the bounce rate and sends even less traffic to your site.

It's a never ending, negative spiral that can quickly put you out of business.

A solution is real.

The easiest way to prevent all these issues is to consistently write solid, original content that clearly communicates your business's message, brand and voice. Use our tips throughout this e-book, and you'll be solidly on the road to winning more readers.

CONTENT IS KING

CONTEXT IS QUEEN

CONSISTENCY IS KEY

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Behind the Scenes at All Things Writing

Let's get back to basics. While all of this information may be well and good, perhaps it's the general practice of writing that's holding you back.

The process

The writing process — did you learn it 100 years ago in school somewhere along the line? Do you remember what Mrs. Something said? Maybe not. When you don't write regularly or you're not in a field that requires much writing, it's easy to forget how to get from point A to point Z. As a public service message, we're here to review the writing process quickly with you, then describe our own process for producing quality content.

1. **Brainstorming**: This is the step you take to generate topics and narrow them down.

2. **Outlining**: This is when you organize your thoughts, either on paper or in your head.

3. **Drafting**: This is the oft dreaded "sit down and write" step.

4. **Revising**: This is the part of the process that requires you to examine your draft closely and clean up the content's organization, wording, etc.

5. **Proofreading**: This is when you identify and correct typos, misspelling, punctuation issues, formatting problems, etc.

Our steps

Now that you've been transported back to the days of small desks and spitballs, here's what we at All Things Writing do as a team to generate each piece of content we deliver:

Interview the client.

1. Get a topic, either from clients or from our brainstorming.
2. Narrow the topic to something specific to the client's business and/or philosophy.
3. Outline (usually in our heads).
4. Draft a piece, which goes to an editor.
5. Revise the piece, paying particular attention to voice.
6. Send the piece to the client for review.
7. Make changes based on client requests.
8. Proofread once more.
9. Publish and disseminate the product through various channels.

Yes, this really IS the process we go through for EVERY piece of content we produce unless the client opts out of approving the content prior to publication. (Some clients do this when they are too busy to review. They trust our editorial process and our content specialists, which is perfectly acceptable, since we would not put out anything that clients would not be proud to call their own.)

A little about us

- We currently have a team of nine, plus partnering companies, providing a full spectrum of services.
- We partner with news organizations and magazines to bring our clients greater exposure.
- We keep up-to-date on social media and content marketing trends.
- We are proficient in or learn various website platforms in order to accommodate our clients and post for them.
- We publish through a variety of social media channels, according to required formats.
- We partner with web development experts to create attractive, functional websites.
- We have a graphics professional to design logos, marketing materials, eBooks, hard copy books and more.
- We partner with a video professional to supplement written content.
- We help write and publish books.
- We offer content marketing consultations. We also teach clients to use their websites and social media platforms.

So now we've provided you with the knowledge and the easiest approach for creating stand-out content. Okay, maybe that's not the easiest way, especially if writing content, articles and blogs isn't your thing. That's where All Things Writing comes in.

We work with you closely to give you the kind of website copy you need to boost your business. Our talent is at your disposal. Let us put it to good use by helping make your business successful.

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Bios

Katherine Gotthardt, Owner, All Things Writing, LLC

Katherine Gotthardt, M.Ed., writing concentration, has been writing, editing and teaching for more than twenty years. For the past ten years, she has focused on content development and content marketing for small to mid-size businesses, writing and disseminating material that increases client visibility while supporting their brand.

Besides being published in dozens of journals, Katherine has authored four books: Poems from the Battlefield, Furbily-Furld Takes on the World, Approaching Felonias Park and Weaker Than Water.

Erin Pittman, Content Development Specialist, Lead Editor

A project manager, writer and editor, Erin Pittman has almost a decade of professional experience in both print and online materials. She holds a BA in English from Randolph-Macon College.

Her work has been featured in local and national publications, as well as on various local and national websites and blogs. Writing topics include marketing, personal finance, special needs, military, parenting, seniors, local events, real estate, service industries, business profiles and more.

Chelsea Tompkins, Graphic and Website Designer

Chelsea holds a BA in anthropology from the University of South Florida and has extensive experience and education in web design and development. She has a keen eye for design, and because of her background in anthropology, Chelsea has a deep understanding of how people think. She uses this knowledge to create user-friendly experiences and eye-catching designs.

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