


4 AUDIT





WHEN I'M SPEAKING ABOUT CONTENT STRATEGY at conferences, I often ask my audience, “How many of you really know, in detail, what content you have on your website today and where it all lives?”

Even in crowds of 400 to 500 people, I usually see only one or two raised hands.

This is a problem.

Before you ever begin to brainstorm about which content you need, you must understand exactly what you have. Before you can decide where to focus your web improvement efforts (and allocate your budget), you need to know exactly what needs improving and why.

And to know these things, you need to do a content audit.

SEEING IS BELIEVING

A web content audit is a full accounting of the content your organization currently has online.

Auditing web content—especially a large website—might sound tedious and time-consuming. It can be. But the results are extraordinarily valuable. In fact, an audit is your key tool for making a business case for any web content project.

When you finish this chapter, you'll understand the basics on how to:

- Create a content inventory.
- Do a quantitative content audit.
- Do a qualitative content audit.
- Approach specialized content audits.

Here's how it works.

THINKING ABOUT SKIPPING THIS CHAPTER? DON'T.

So you think you know what's on your site, do you? Or you have the general idea, anyhow. So it should be easy to decide what to do next about your content. Right?

Do not—repeat, **DO NOT**—skip the content audit. This process is not just about listing URLs and page titles. It can provide an extraordinary amount of useful, enlightening information that's surprisingly valuable, especially when you're fighting for project support and funding.

AUDIT ADVANTAGES

The biggest advantage of doing a content audit is proving to stakeholders the magnitude of content that needs to be considered. By using a spreadsheet to catalogue the number of HTML pages, downloadable PDFs, dynamic content modules, video clips, and other “live” web content for which your organization is responsible, you can wake up stakeholders to the harsh reality of their content woes.

A content audit can also:

- Serve as a reference for source (or existing) content during content development, which is highly efficient for writers and other content creators.
- Help you scope and even budget for a content project.
- Give you a clear understanding of what you have and where it lives, even if only to begin thinking about maintenance or content removal.

Because there are several different reasons for undertaking a content audit, it's a good idea to create clear goals for the audit before you begin. That way, you can tailor the kind of information you record in your audit to meet your needs or stakeholder interests. The more targeted the information in the audit is, the more likely you are to get the results you're looking for.

YES, YOU REALLY DO NEED TO LOOK AT ALL THE CONTENT

It's important to look at *all* the content. This means getting beyond the home page and key landing pages. Why? Because the “deeper” content is often where your customers run into major problems.

In his book *Killer Web Content*, Gerry McGovern writes:

I come across many websites where there is a well-designed top level with quality content. However, when you click down a few levels, everything changes—it's like walking out of a plush hotel straight into a rubbish dump.

You might have that website now. And although an audit of such a website may be painful, but it will show you—and your stakeholders—what needs to change.


THE CONTENT INVENTORY: YOUR CORE AUDIT TOOL

To audit your current web content, click through every single page of your website and any other web content for which your organization is responsible, and record what you find. Then, you'll record your findings in a document called a **content inventory**.

A content inventory is nothing more than a spreadsheet that captures information (such as page title or URL) for each web page or content module you're responsible for creating, reviewing, or caring for.

Organize the content in your spreadsheet like an outline, ensuring that each page or module is clearly listed within its own site section.

Here's what a content inventory looks like:

 BRAIN TRAFFIC BrainTraffic.com Content Inventory: Current state website June 15, 2009		
PAGE ID	PAGE NAME	SOURCE CONTENT
0.0	Home Page	http://www.braintraffic.com
1.0	What We Do	http://www.braintraffic.com/what-we-do/
1.1	Web Content Strategy	http://www.braintraffic.com/what-we-do/web-content-strategy/
1.2	Information Architecture	http://www.braintraffic.com/what-we-do/information-architecture/
1.3	Writing for the Web	http://www.braintraffic.com/what-we-do/writing-for-the-web/
1.4	Training and Seminars	http://www.braintraffic.com/what-we-do/training-seminars/
2.0	Our Portfolio	http://www.braintraffic.com/our-portfolio/
3.0	Our People	http://www.braintraffic.com/our-people/
3.1	Kristina Halvorson	http://www.braintraffic.com/our-people/kristina-halvorson/
3.2	Amy Wallace	http://www.braintraffic.com/our-people/amy-wallace/
3.3	Angie Halama	http://www.braintraffic.com/our-people/angie-halama/
3.4	Angie King	http://www.braintraffic.com/our-people/angie-king/
3.5	Beth Johnson	http://www.braintraffic.com/our-people/beth-johnson/
3.6	Christine Benson	http://www.braintraffic.com/our-people/christine-benson/
3.7	David Bowen	http://www.braintraffic.com/our-people/david-bowen/
3.8	Elizabeth Saloka	http://www.braintraffic.com/our-people/elizabeth-saloka/
3.9	Erin Anderson	http://www.braintraffic.com/our-people/erin-anderson/
3.10	Josh Foldy	http://www.braintraffic.com/our-people/josh-foldy/
4.0	Our Blog	http://braintraffic.typepad.com/
5.0	Contact Us	http://www.braintraffic.com/contact-us/
6.0	Privacy Policy	http://www.braintraffic.com/privacy/
7.0	Sitemap	http://www.braintraffic.com/sitemap/

Then what? Well, it's up to you. The level of detail you want to capture in your audit will depend solely on your business objectives.

Let's take a look at different types of audits and why they might be used.

QUANTITATIVE AUDIT: LOW-HANGING FRUIT

A quantitative content audit is basically an index of the content on your site. Just the facts. No frills. It's the easiest thing to do when you're trying to get your arms around what content you have and where it lives.

It's a good idea to do a quantitative audit when you want raw, undisputed data about your site content. **It also may be a "quick win" when you have a very limited timeframe to build a business case or prepare for an upcoming web project.**

For larger websites, Lou Rosenfeld (Rosenfeld Media) makes a great case for doing a "rolling content inventory," or a quantitative content audit that basically never ends:

Inventory your content on an ongoing basis. A content inventory is a process, not a deliverable. A content inventory shouldn't be something that you allocate the first two weeks of your redesign to; allocate 10 percent or 15 percent of your job to it instead.

... We've got to get used to the reality that ongoing, partial content inventories are likely to be far more cost-effective than trying to achieve the perfect, all-encompassing snapshot of our content. Traditional content inventory methods continue to make sense with small websites. But anyone who is trying to inventory the typical corporate, academic, or governmental site needs to stop tilting at the windmill of comprehensiveness.*

In general, a quantitative content audit is often the very first step in any content audit process. It can answer some or all of these questions:

- What content do you have?
- How is it organized?
- Who creates it?
- Where does it live?

Let's see how the answers to these questions will help inform your content strategy.

WHAT CONTENT DO YOU HAVE?

In 2002, Jeff Veen (Small Batch) wrote a very concise blog post on how to conduct a quantitative audit of your website content:

Start at your home page. Identify the major sections of your site. For example, at adaptivepath.com, we've divided our site into these sections: team, services, workshops, publications, and contact. If I were doing an inventory of [a] site, I'd start with [a] section, click in, and see what's linked from it. For each page that I visit, I'd record the information specified in the columns of the spreadsheet. I'd follow every link and navigate as far as I could through the site, making sure to gather data about every possible page on the site.†

* www.louisrosenfeld.com/home/bloug_archive/000448.html

† Doing a Content Inventory (Or, A Mind-Numbingly Detailed Odyssey Through Your Web Site) at www.adaptivepath.com/ideas/essays/archives/000040.php

You may want to note what kind of content each page or component is. This is particularly helpful if you're using a CMS with specified content types. Examples of different kinds of content include articles, marketing promotions, press releases, employee biographies, product information, frequently asked questions, and blog posts.

You should also record:

- PDFs and other downloads
- Videos
- Forms
- Functional pages (such as shopping carts and registration)
- ... and so on

HOW IS THE CONTENT ORGANIZED?

Whenever possible, it's most helpful to catalogue your web content like you would create an outline. List major website sections as your top-level "parent" (or primary) sections, and plug in pages and modules as "children" (or secondary, tertiary, and so on) sections or pages contained within each main section.

There are a few reasons to take the time to clearly document current-state content organization and hierarchy in your content inventory.

First, if you have a lot of web content, part of what's great about an audit is that you can finally figure out where it lives and how exactly it's organized. A content inventory can document that information in a way that anyone can review and react to it.

PAGE ID	PAGE NAME
0.0	Home Page
1.0	What We Do
1.1	Web Content Strategy
1.2	Information Architecture
1.3	Writing for the Web
1.4	Training and Seminars
2.0	Our Portfolio
3.0	Our People
3.1	Kristina Halvorson
3.2	Amy Wallace
3.3	Angie Halama

Second, if you don't already have a numbering system for your web content, it's a good idea to start one now. You can organize it in the same way you'd organize a document outline (1.0, 1.1, 1.1.1, and so on). By assigning a unique numeric ID to each page or component, you'll have a much clearer picture of exactly which content belongs to which section of your website. It's also incredibly helpful to have a system like this established when it comes time to link up the content

inventory to other web project documentation; the number of a specific web page can correspond to the content strategy recommendations for that page, as well as the functional specifications for that page, and so on.

WHO CREATES THE CONTENT?

At a high level, it's useful to note whether each piece of content on your site was created in-house, by a content partner (newsfeeds, articles, blog posts, and so on), or by your users.

For content created by your internal team, if you can, note who creates, approves, and publishes each piece of content. This information can be enormously helpful when you begin to ask questions about why certain content was done a certain way, or when you want to confirm it's okay to change or remove the content. We'll examine this topic in detail in *Chapter 7, Workflow*.

WHERE DOES THE CONTENT LIVE?

If you're dealing with a very large site that's hosted on a number of different servers or platforms, take note of where the content lives within your technical infrastructure.

In your inventory, include a column for content location. Is the content in a content management system (CMS)? Static HTML? If so, what are the unique URLs? How is dynamic content (that is, content that is delivered in components versus entire pages) managed? Are people publishing content directly to a website from their desktops or servers?

Sometimes content may be stored in very strange places, so be prepared to do some digging.

QUALITATIVE AUDIT: A DEEPER DIVE

Seeing what content you have and where it lives is helpful, but only to a point.

Many a site map has been constructed based solely on page titles. But when it comes to qualifying the usefulness of content, a page title doesn't tell

you what the content actually says, or if it's useful to your audience. That's where a qualitative audit comes in.

A qualitative audit analyzes the *quality and effectiveness* of the content.

Your findings from this analysis provide insight to whether or not the content is useful, usable, enjoyable, and persuasive to your audience.

Some of the questions you might want to answer in your qualitative analysis include:

- What does the content say?
- Is the content accurate?
- Is the content useful?
- Is the content used by your audiences?
- Is the content written professionally?
- Is the content user-friendly?

WHAT DOES THE CONTENT SAY?

A page headline or paragraph subheads are very easy to scan, and quickly. However, they won't necessarily tell you what information is actually contained on each page.

Headlines and subheads can be unintentionally misleading. Don't trust them. Instead, make the time to carefully read (or watch, or listen to) your content. Only then will you be able to accurately record what information is presented. Create a "topics" or "notes" column in your inventory to record what topics are discussed on each page.

IS THE CONTENT ACCURATE?

Inaccurate or out-of-date content can mislead your users, be plain embarrassing, or, at worst, expose you to a lawsuit. Ask: Is the information correct? Is it up-to-date? Does it use your organization's most recent trademarks and copyrights? Do the links still work? You may need to engage subject matter experts in this part of the audit to help identify what's outdated or straight-up wrong.

In your content inventory, add a column for accuracy and create a rating scale. You might have a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 being good and 5 being ridiculously bad.) Or, you might want a more descriptive list of options such as: good, updates needed, completely inaccurate. Whatever your scale is, keep it consistent so you can sort your spreadsheet later to summarize your findings.

IS THE CONTENT USEFUL?

If your website content isn't supporting the successful fulfillment of your business objectives or your users' top goals, it's a waste of pixels.

Start by adding two columns to your inventory:

- Value to user.
- Value to business.

For each of these columns you can use a 1 to 5 ranking or high/medium/low... whatever works for you. Again, keep your scale consistent.

IS THE CONTENT USED BY YOUR AUDIENCE?

How many people are visiting and reacting to your content? How can you know for sure? If you have accurate web analytics reports and analyses, take a look at them. Compare this to your usefulness scores. Are there connections? Trends? Discrepancies?

Work with a web analytics expert to figure out which metrics are meaningful in relation to the insights you're trying to gain.

IS THE CONTENT WRITTEN PROFESSIONALLY?

It's often all too easy to spot content written by people who are not professional writers. When reviewing your content:

- **Check grammar, word usage, and spelling.** How would your eighth-grade English teacher grade this content?
- **Examine voice and tone.** Does the current voice and tone match up to your brand guidelines? At the very least, does it read the way you want it to sound?

- **Look at how the content is structured.** Does the page have short or long paragraphs? Subheads? Too many text links? Too few?
- **Verify the content lives up to web best practices.** Are links consistent with page titles? Are meaningful keywords used in page titles and subheads? Are sentences clear, compelling, and to the point?

To make your audit valuable, add a “writing” column to your inventory and create a consistent rating scale. And, if you don’t have grammar and writing expertise, ask an experienced web editor or web writer to weigh in. They’d love to.

IS THE CONTENT USER-FRIENDLY?

Depending on your organization, “user-friendly” may mean different things. Regardless, it’s very important to consider your content from your user’s perspective.

Consider the information. Is it focused on meeting customer needs, or is it all about your organization? Does it use internal buzzwords and acronyms, or is it written so that your target audiences will understand and relate to it?

By now you know the drill. Add a column called something like “user-friendliness” and create a consistent rating scale.

SPECIALIZED AUDITS: BECAUSE CONTENT IS COMPLEX

The quantitative and qualitative audits are the core processes that you’ll use to analyze your web content. But depending on your business and the goals of your audit, it’s possible that you’ll need to gather specific information about your content that’s unique to your organizational mission or project objectives.

Here are a few good examples of what I call “specialized” audits. You can add these pieces to either a quantitative or qualitative inventory.

SEO: IS THE CONTENT FINDABLE?

Although SEO is not the only consideration when creating “findable” content, it’s most often the tactic we turn to (for now). There are two main issues to consider when analyzing the quality of your content findability:

- **Content findability.** How are your targeted keywords performing in web search engines? How is your internal site search engine performing and why?

If you have a search engine optimization (SEO) strategy in place, you should have access to the list of keywords that are important to feature in page headers and body copy. You can add a column to your inventory to list which keywords appear on each page or simply rank whether the use of keywords on the page is appropriate.

- **Content readability.** Some SEO copywriters are guilty of loading content with so many keywords that it becomes overly redundant or even unreadable. Check to see that the keywords are worked into the content in ways that support meaning and clarity, not destroy them.

METADATA: THE CONTENT BEHIND THE CONTENT

When you’re analyzing your site content, remember that there’s more to it than just the words on the screen, or video or audio artifacts. For content findability and management purposes, among myriad other considerations, it’s a good idea to gather and analyze the metadata.

Metadata is “information about information.” It’s the attributes we assign to content that allow web search engines to index our content. Metadata is also what helps our site search engines and content management systems organize and deliver content when and where our users need it most.

What kind of information about metadata you record depends on your needs, but a few things may include:

- What is the quality of the metadata for the page? (Add a column and rank it.)
- If you didn’t include them in your SEO audit, what are the page titles, keywords, header tags, and page descriptions associated with the page or content? (Add a column and paste keywords in.)

In the analysis and strategy phases, you (or someone) should develop a metadata strategy for your new and improved content. No matter who's responsible for that strategy, their first question will be, What are the existing metadata schema? Be ready with the answers. Talk to whoever is currently responsible for metadata, find out what's been done to structure and maintain it (if anything), and document your findings.

LOCALIZATION AUDIT: WHEN IN ROME...

If your site serves people in distinctly different regions, cultures, or countries, whether or not the content requires translation, it's very important to consider the localization (or attunement to cultural differences and perspectives) of your content, including:

- **Language translation.** Simply translating content from one language to another rarely achieves the desired effect. Nuance is lost, meanings are misinterpreted, homonyms are slaughtered. What might be misinterpreted in context of local slang, social norms, and societal values?
Rank whether the translation accurately represents your business goals and user needs.
- **Cultural indicators.** Are the images, testimonials, and case study examples relevant and meaningful to your geographically targeted audiences? (For example, Jennifer and Jason might be common names used in case studies in the United States. Brazil or China, not so much.)
Rank whether each piece of content is culturally on target or sticks out like a sore thumb.

If you don't have the language or cultural knowledge necessary, ensure that you have an expert, savvy cultural advisor or translator reviewing all content for any red flags.

WRANGLING THE RESULTS

Once your content audit is complete, you should have a clear understanding of what content you have and (hopefully) where it's coming from. So, now what do you do with all that information?

You can take immediate action by removing or archiving content that is so egregiously bad that you can (or must) retire it immediately. At the very least, you can send your audit to anyone and everyone who needs to take a look at your content universe, in all its messy, messed-up glory.

These things will likely make you a hero, or least they will get people's attention. And once you have people's attention, you have the opportunity to present a business case for your web project or initiative. And any project or initiative worth its salt begins with in-depth analysis of all relevant information and circumstances, which in turn leads to informed, achievable recommendations.

Yep. The content strategy party has only begun.