

# CONTENT STRATEGY

FOR THE WEB

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SECOND EDITION

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Foreword by Sarah Cancilla, Facebook

## **ADVANCE PRAISE FOR *CONTENT STRATEGY FOR THE WEB*, SECOND EDITION:**

“The first edition of Kristina Halvorson’s little book was like a rip in the Matrix through which light poured. In the space of a few chapters, she had changed our field forever, for the better. This second edition retains all that was wonderful in the first book, while yielding dazzling new insights into the hows and whys of content strategy.”

—Jeffrey Zeldman, author, *Designing With Web Standards*

“When I wanted to introduce content strategy as a ‘must’ for eBay Europe, I bought a copy of *Content Strategy for the Web* for everyone I needed to influence. Two years and a content strategy team later, it clearly worked! By far the most comprehensive and accessible book on content strategy available. Required reading for our entire team.”

—Lucie Hyde, Head of Content, eBay Europe

“*Content Strategy for the Web* is the most important thing to happen to user experience design in years.”

—Peter Morville, author, *Information Architecture for the World Wide Web* and *Ambient Findability*

“Marketers, take note: From mobile and social media to email and websites, killer content is central to your online success—but without a solid, centralized content strategy, you’re doomed from the start. Like no other book, *Content Strategy for the Web* gives you the tools you need to get the right content to the right people in the right place at the right time. Essential reading for marketers everywhere.”

—Ann Handley, CMO, MarketingProfs and author, *Content Rules*

“This is the go-to handbook for creating an effective content strategy. The Post-It® notes and dog-eared pages in my copy are evidence of that!”


—Aaron Watkins, Director of Digital Strategy, Johns Hopkins Medicine

“Kristina Halvorson and her company, Brain Traffic, are central to the emerging discipline of content strategy.”

—James Mathewson, Search Strategy and Expertise Lead, IBM

# 5 AUDIT





SOMETIMES, WE'LL ASK a conference audience, “How many of you know exactly what you have on your website, where it lives, and who owns it?”

Inevitably, even in rooms of several hundred people, only one or two people raise their hands.

This, friends, is a problem. To make even the most basic decisions about your content—like deciding where to focus your resources and budget—it’s good to know how much content you have, where it lives, what it’s about, and whether it’s any good.

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

## SEEING IS BELIEVING

A web content audit is an accounting of the content your organization currently has online. More often than not, when you’re finished (or even midstream), the results are unbelievably valuable. As we said in the first chapter, an audit can be one of your most powerful tools when making a business case for any web content project.

When you finish this chapter, you'll understand:

- Why audits are important
- What kinds of audits are most common
- How to record your audit findings
- How much content you need to evaluate
- How to share your results

Let's get to it.

## THINKING ABOUT SKIPPING THIS CHAPTER? DON'T.

"We know the basic gist of what's on our site." "Somebody else in our organization must have done this before." "I hate spreadsheets and don't want to waste my valuable time on this."

Here's the deal. No matter how unnecessary or unpleasant an audit may look to you, don't skip it. This process isn't just about building up a nice spreadsheet of URLs and page titles. Audits can:

- Help you scope and 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
- Serve as a reference for source (or existing) content during content development, making it a highly efficient tool for writers and other content creators to keep track of what they have to work with

## CAN'T ROBOTS DO THIS FOR ME?

At this point you may be thinking, "An audit sounds awfully time-consuming. Surely there are widgets that can audit my website automagically!"

The answer is yes—there are "audit tools" that can crawl sites and capture basic information, such as titles and links. Some CMSes have audit-like features, too. During the audit process, this kind of technology can be extremely helpful and, in some cases, necessary. **But beware.** Technology doesn't replace the context provided by human review. If you really want an in-depth understanding of your content—substance, quality, accuracy—people power is the best way to go.

## CASE STUDY THE VALUE OF AN AUDIT—SAVING TIME, SAVING MONEY

Carrie Hane Dennison works for a full-service web development firm called Balance Interactive in Springfield, Virginia. She says that her clients are starting to realize they need content strategy, even if they don't know what it is.

Although clients aren't always looking for a line item called "strategy," Carrie finds ways to address content strategy. She prefers to do so early in a site redesign, but sometimes works with clients after content requirements are already in place. At either stage, using an inventory is one way Carrie helps her clients understand and address strategy. She explains to clients that, for every 5 hours they spend auditing near to the beginning of a project, they might save 20 hours at a later stage, preventing project delays.

After conducting an inventory of existing and needed content, Carrie asks her clients to spend time thinking about messaging, or considering the number of hours needed to complete the writing or content migration. She recalls one client who took one look at the inventory and said, "There's no way I can get this all done." Rather than setting up her own staff to fail, the client hired Carrie's team to help migrate the content. The result was an on-time launch of the new website, rather than a month late.

That's really the point of an audit: You can anticipate problems before they arise, and avoid derailing your project. All of that time and money may seem daunting at the beginning, but Carrie's clients are impressed when the investment means they're able to launch a better site, on schedule.

Technology *can* help you get:

- **Quick wins:** When you have a very limited timeframe to build a business case or to prepare for an upcoming web project, technology can help. For example, if you want to understand the total volume of content on a website, an audit tool can give you a ballpark estimate in a hurry.
- **A head start:** Auto-audit tools can save you tons of time by creating a complete list of all of your content, as well as some basic info about each content piece. Additionally, in sites without traditional navigation, CMS-driven tools may be the only way to get a complete list without going totally insane.
- **Neutral data:** In organizations large and small, content discussions can get political. In this case, technologically generated, raw, undisputed data about your content can be your best friend.

Even with all of the technical shortcuts available, many content strategists prefer to do audits by hand. There is simply no better way to fully comprehend all of your existing content.

## COMMON TYPES OF AUDITS: CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

Here's the single, most important thing you need to know about audits:

**The kind of audit you do depends on what you want to learn.** There is no one perfect format, size, or timing for an audit; there are many different (and totally valid) ways to audit your content. What you pick depends on your goals.

Here are a few of the most common content audits.

AUDIT TYPE	DESCRIPTION	WHY	WHEN
<b>Quantitative inventory</b>	A list of all the content you have—just like the inventory of the products in a warehouse or store	Demonstrate magnitude and complexity of your existing content	Before content strategy work begins (right now)
<b>Qualitative audit: Best practices assessment</b>	A comparison of your content against industry best practices, usually done by a third-party, unbiased assessor	Prioritize content efforts (usually by identifying the lowest quality content and gaping holes)	Before strategy begins or in the early stages of strategy development
<b>Qualitative audit: Strategic assessment</b>	An invaluable, in-depth look at how your content measures up to your strategic goals (business or user)	Identify gaps between where you are and where you want to go; get insight into what resources you'll need to get there	Works best after your core strategy and key strategic recommendations are complete

## WHICH AUDIT IS RIGHT FOR YOU?

There's no hard and fast rule, here. You can choose to do one of these audits, all three, or create your own audit format. No matter what you choose, doing a thorough audit will give you priceless information about your content.

Start by setting clear goals for your audit. These will help you determine which audit(s) you choose and what information they capture.

Think about:

- What you want to learn (and why)
- What you need to prove (and to whom)
- How long you have to get the audit done (be realistic)
- Where you are in the content strategy process (if you're not sure, see the next five chapters ...)

Let's take a closer look at each of the audit types.

## QUANTITATIVE INVENTORY: JUST THE FACTS

The goal of a quantitative inventory is to learn what you have, where it lives, and a few other basic stats. No frills. Just objective facts.

A quantitative inventory is the quickest and easiest way to get some insight into your content at the beginning of a project. BUT. By simply cataloging the number of 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 magnitude of your content—and the budget you need to create/maintain/fix it. Cha-ching.

### What to record

Here's a list of the most common bits of data recorded in quantitative inventories. Title/Topics is a must-have. The other factors you choose depend on—you guessed it—your audit goals:

- **ID:** Assign an identification number or code to each piece of content. (See page 57 for more information.)
- **Title/Topics:** For a web page, this is likely the title of the page. For a content module, you may choose to use the heading or subhead. If there is no title of the content piece or page, include a short description of the key topics or themes covered.
- **URL:** Record only where applicable.
- **Format:** Make a note of the technical format of the content, such as text, video, PDF, etc.