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Simple Ideas for Quality Content

By Grant McNamara

What is good quality content for a web site? We can usually recognize quality content when we see it. It is a total package deal; the words used, the grammar, the presentation, the supporting artwork. Daily I receive articles from people giving advice that quality content is one of the golden rules of the Internet. Without quality content your visitors just don't stay, and never return.

An entire industry has grown to support and help companies develop their web sites to present quality content. There are editors and copy writers, localization experts to name a few. These companies specialize in web sites. They help to develop compelling language, usually designed for the visitor who skim reads. They recognize that the visitor might devote two minutes or less, and unless in those few moments they `are captured', they wont read anything in depth and result: NO SALE.

If we can hold these fleeting visitors to actually read our words with some care, and hence take our product offer seriously, our language has to support their initial good impression. Spelling errors, poor grammar, slow loading art, and countless other factors will all debase quality.

Little inconsistencies in our written language bother visitors. For example, hyphenating a word on one page and not hyphenating the same word on a different page. Visitors aren't necessarily even conscious of the errors; but they are left with negative feelings.

When we first develop a web site we devote considerable resources. We check and edit and test, may be take user surveys and then check it all again. And finally our web site can be described as finished. If only it were so simple. As most people who manage a web site will know, things change. And changes, improvements and enhancements to our web site are usually a continuing effort.

And because we are working mainly with that wonderful tool called language, we're working with a changing foundation. The Internet itself has added a whole new set of words. Over the past few months I've been developing an Internet support web site intended to help small businesses (it is <http://www.selling-it.com/>). Throughout the project I've been faced with choices about how to spell words. Should I write an e-book or an ebook? Which letters do I capitalize? If I'm a Webmaster why do I run a web site? Is it a Unix or a UNIX or a unix server that I'm using? Will people buy my products using checks or cheques? Technical words like php, .htaccess file and MySQL were all problems. In

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fact new words and phrases are continuously added to our language.

Then we have the traditional problems that English presents. Some words allow two quite acceptable spelling forms; i.e. inquire and enquire. Is it best to use British or American spelling on a web site? Numbers present special problems. Were there 25 enthusiastic testimonials or twenty five?

Initially I tried to rely on my spell checker but sadly it wasn't much help. I worked hard researching a variety of web sites providing advice on quality content. But no where was I able to find a categorical definition of correct spelling and capitalization of many technology related words. And you bet I tried dictionaries.

Many words are so new that there isn't a definitive spelling. On the positive side there was a message I could follow. When there isn't an accepted spelling, and to maintain quality content; spell the word consistently throughout the web site. I hope you'll agree that's great advice. It certainly simplifies the issue. But I was still left with a problem.

How can you ensure your entire web site's content is consistent? This takes special significance if you're content is developed by more than one person. Being consistent is one of the keys to making your writing exceptional.

My first suggestion for you is to use a style sheet. A style sheet is simply a list of words and phrases that you add to. You start with a big sheet of paper divided into eight boxes: ABCD, EFGH, IJKL, MNOP, QRST, UVWXYZ, Numbers, and Names.

Then every time you use a word that has more than one acceptable style you add the word to the appropriate box. For example, if you decide on e-Commerce as the form (which could be equally written as eCommerce or E-Commerce) add the phrase to the EFGH box on your style sheet. Then every time you go to use the word you check first against your style sheet, rather than looking back through earlier web pages you have written to see how you spelt it.

Over time your style sheet will build up to the point where you need a page for each box. But the style sheet allows you to have a single, easy to refer to place where you list all the words and phrases that you need to use consistently.

The style sheet also becomes an especially valuable resource when changes need to be made to your web site.

My second suggestion is to have a few rules to follow that allow you to avoid your weaknesses. For instance I have a problem in that I waffle. When I do this my sentences can easily run and run. So one rule I have is that no sentence can be more than thirty words long. Another problem I have is that I tend to use stale, stuffy phrases instead of simple words. So another rule in my edit list is to check to ensure I use simple language.

And above all the `What's in it for them?'. What I mean is I try to focus on the visitor to my web site and write language from their perspective, needs and focus.

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In proofreading the following helps:

Let it sit: Never proofread just after writing. You're too close to your words and your ego needs time away from the text in order to evaluate it subjectively.

Read it aloud: This gives a new perspective. As you hear the words you can better gauge sentence length and how your words will sound to someone else.

Exchange it with a colleague: Perhaps risky but a guaranteed way to improve. Give your text to someone you respect and trust. Ask for their feedback.

Read it backwards, from bottom to top: Reading backwards allows you to pick up typos, repetitions, and other mechanical errors. You will read the actual words written, not what you meant to write.

Use reference materials: Even professional writers use dictionaries, punctuation handbooks and spelling guides.

Finally, after you've carefully proofread your document ask:

Have I accomplished my original purpose in writing?

Did I tell the reader what I want?

I really hope this has given you some ideas to achieve quality content.

Grant McNamara has over 20 years experience in IT, and specializes in multi-lingual web site and software development and training. Visit his site for free advice and resources for the success of your web site at: <http://www.translateme.co.nz> or <mailto:grant.mcnamara@translateme.co.nz>

Text Is King!

By James C. Micucci

Are you building your website? If so, STOP! Take a look at what you have done so far. How many images do you have? How much text do you have?

If your website has more images than text then you could be in trouble. Ask yourself these two questions

What are my visitors at my website for?

Chances are, your visitors came to your website to find information on a topic or to answer a question. They probably didn't come to look at pictures (unless you run a photo gallery). Give your visitors what they want and they will keep on coming back.

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Why did I put all these images on my website.

Now, this is not always true, but what I have found is that people put a lot of images on their website to make up for poor quality content. They think if they have a pretty looking website, people won't pay that much attention to the text. That is another wrong assumption that should never be made.

REMEMEMBER: People come to get quality content, and will leave if you don't provide any

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If your website has more text than images, good for you, keep up the good work and good things will come to you.

James C. Micucci is the webmaster at

. Although his site is still in

development, in the near future he will become one of the premier content providers on the internet

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