Content that Works Everywhere

(Including Smartphones)

WHY CHANGE YOUR CONTENT?

58% *of U.S. adults use their phones to access the web. For* **34%** *of them, their phone is their chief method of going online. (Pew Internet Project, 2014)*

It's very, very likely that people are visiting your site from a phone or other mobile device. Text that was written for desktop display tends to look and sound a lot different from text that's optimized for how they're viewing it.

If you have lots of pages, complex navigation, long paragraphs, or copy that was written for screens more than just a few inches wide, chances are your mobile viewers are getting a frustrating experience.

FOCUS CONTENT FOR MOBILE

By reformatting your content for the environment with the most constraints, you'll also make your desktop site cleaner and more flexible. And it'll put you in phenomenal shape for future design updates that might integrate custom functional modules or incorporate more multimedia.

People use your site like an ATM touch-screen menu, driving down deeper to more specific elements that are relevant to their transaction. But, many sites are organized like the filing cabinet of a 10-year veteran to the organization, complete with acronyms, departmental divisions, and internal jargon. There might even be documents slapped straight onto the web as PDFs, with no editing to account for the change in platform.

Here are some things you can do to get past the old print and desktop hangups and clean up your content for the way people are viewing it now.

FORMAT PAGES FOR MOBILE DEVICES

Eliminate immediate problems that might render your content useless to a phone or tablet.

- Convert files that open in programs mobile devices don't have. Edit Microsoft Word docs and PowerPoint slides and transfer them to HTML. Use PDFs if necessary, but don't hide information in downloadable files.

- Take essential information out of the sidebars. If it needs to display next to content at the top of a page, include it in with that content. Sidebars often get bumped to the bottom on a vertically stacked mobile screen.

- Avoid using tables for non-comparative information. They get mangled on mobile screens, so consider converting to a simple list, image, or PDF.

- Find out what's in Adobe Flash or other fancy display formats and work with a developer to provide a reasonable mobile-friendly alternative.

- Check pages on a vertical phone and flag problems that need a developer's help. Info graphics and layout elements with fixed widths can be disastrous for phone viewing.

EDIT TEXT FOR STRUCTURE

Start with your most-viewed pages and restructure the content so it displays better on mobile devices.

- Aim for just one or two main ideas per page. Break up long pages with distinct ideas into smaller ones organized beneath a new landing page, with navigational links and short 10- to 25-word descriptions.

- A standard mobile screen fits approximately 100 words at a time. Divide into paragraphs of 50 words or less. One-sentence paragraphs are OK.

- For detail pages that are informational (i.e., text-heavy pages) search engines favor lengths between 200-550 words.

- Use inverted pyramid style, just like a journalist. Put the most important info right up front, in short, simple sentences.

- Leave out greetings, transitions, and framing phrases like "the following information" or "welcome to the department." Say what you mean in as few words as possible.

- Use lots of headers that describe what's in their section.

- Convert sentences with lists into bullets. It creates visual space that helps readers scan.

CONTENT AUDIT

This is your website, in spreadsheet format. Use a free web crawler, output from your CMS, a paid service that includes pretty screenshots, or hours of clicking and typing to set it up. However you get it, include a row for each page and columns for whatever you want to know about it:

- Page title and URL

- Amount and type of work it needs (keep, edit, rewrite, delete)

- Assets that cause problems for mobile (tables, info graphics, proprietary file formats)

- Whether you've edited or reviewed it yet

- When to check it again for updates (annually, quarterly, etc.)

- Who to ask for reviews or current information (or if you're lucky, who can be responsible for it!)

A REALISTIC PLAN OF ACTION

If a redesign is imminent, hire a freelance writer or some sort of content specialist to help you through the initial sprint of writing and editing. Information is the primary product of your website, so invest in people who specialize in it. Expecting current employees who are already overloaded to volunteer time can become a point of pain when there's a firm deadline.

If you have time on your hands, divide the project into workable sections by topic, type, or degree of need. Share the work among subject matter experts, content owners, and writers from other departments and train them to edit for the things you need. Include a checklist (like this sheet!) to help them out. You can share a copy of the content audit spreadsheet and make a column for names and deadlines to keep track of who's doing what.