



# Rethinking 'Content' and its Management

| Why the definition matters to Web success and how a CMS helps |

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## Executive Summary

Prior to the Internet, most people who heard the word 'content' probably made first mental associations with a page at the beginning of a book, a packaging description of a can, or something of that nature. Now the word is essential currency in the digital economy and assumes a completely different sense and reference. Most people feel reasonably assured that they know what the word means and never think to explore the potential within the root concept and its implications within a dynamic environment like the Internet.

This white paper attempts to gain a better understanding of the breadth of possibility within the word and explores how a fresh definition should affect content management as a whole. In particular we'll examine:

- ▶ The roots of the word 'content' and the need for a re-definition
- ▶ The scope of this new definition
- ▶ Its importance to communication on the Web
- ▶ Integrating this understanding into an overarching content strategy
- ▶ How a CMS solution can contribute to implementing this strategy

## Introduction

'Genius, it is said, is the ability to scrutinize the obvious.' The Web is no longer a stunning new turn in the tale of the world. For many of us, it is now an almost unconscious backdrop to the way we live. We go about our business, sparing little thought for the underlying technical concatenations and conceptual categories that make our Internet-enabled lives possible. And as terminology and meanings travel further away from their formative necessities, they become learnt or assumed language. Yes, the Web is that old.

Take the phrase 'content management'. Even better, just take 'content'. Most people are confident they know what the word means and use it without feeling any compulsions to reexamine its currency, vitality and possibilities in a changing context.

## What is 'Content'?

People generally seem to understand the word as signifying 'something that is inside something else'. The colloquial Web-related use of the word 'content' suggests that it is what is contained within various media like film, audio, electronic documents and the like. But with a little etymological ferreting, we find that the roots of the word are drawn from the Latin words, "contentum" which means to contain, and "continere" which means to enclose or hold together. Going by this understanding, content is not 'what is in' so much as it is 'that which holds'. Content isn't what is on the medium of a motion picture, it is the motion picture itself. But if content is a container... what does it contain? The answer, very simply is 'meaning'.



'Content' is derived from the Latin "contentum" which means to contain, and "continere" which means to enclose or hold together!

In his online 'manifesto of contentology,' (a word he coins to mean 'the science/ study of content'), Garth Buchholz explores the implications of this. "Content is by definition, not a dualist concept," he says. "You cannot separate pure meaning from its container; substance idea from the form of presentation. They are inextricably attached." He goes on to state that this is important to understand because a "deconstruction of ideas and communication, into interchangeable components or convenient modules essentially transmogrifies or mutates meaning.

## Towards a Broader Definition

Western thinking (under the influence of Neo-Platonism) has steadfastly maintained a divide between idea and the structures that express it, elevating the former as somehow purer, more perfect and more important than the latter. This dualism fails to acknowledge that we are never quite in a position to know the meaning of someone else's idea outside the form that conveys it. So what does this mean for our definitions of 'content' as it is relevant to the communicative Internet? Clearly, the lines are far blurrier than is often assumed... if legitimate lines can be drawn at all!

Buchholz points out that just as most of our paradigms prior to the digital age were mechanical, audio-visual and textual; they are now increasingly graphical and interactive. Though words have traditionally been thought of as the primary containers of meaning, many of us now live in environments where graphical interfaces are ubiquitous. This evolving reality as well necessitates that we explore a broader definition of content, adequate to the task of embracing all that lies within the ambit of 'form-meaning'.

## The Range of 'Form-Meaning'

First we must recognize just how broad this range is. The way we interpret content is affected by each of the following in both obvious and subtle ways.

- ▶ Its form— whether it is static, rich, interactive or convergent
- ▶ The channel of delivery, the physical environment and human psychological and cognitive processes involved
- ▶ Its presentation, interactivity and functionality
- ▶ The graphical context and technical framework around it

We must also recognize the symbolic and graphical nature of textual content itself and ask how this impacts its interpretation. Though design elements of content like size, color and style are subjectively experienced; they have a psychological impact on our understanding of content. Even meta-content that describes, explains or prefaces other content can be influential in the interpretative process.

Particularly with regards to online content, Buchholz wants us to further consider some principles that affect its potentialities. It is...

*Fluid:* It changes shape to match the channel

*Organic:* It has a lifecycle

*A-synchronistic:* It is not fixed in time

*A-contextual:* It can be experienced in and out of its original context

All this considered, we must accept that the word 'content' as it is often assumed, fails to account for the complex and expansive playing field of meaning and the structures and forms that make it.

## Why is this Important?

That should be fairly obvious to content providers. The lifeblood of the Internet is content. Without meaningful communication, the Web is nothing. Maximizing the potential of an online presence demands that we reexamine and recast the definitions that influence our practice, to be as true to experience as possible. Undoubtedly, this is an ongoing process, and yet one that unravels along the reliable principle of tri-directional interactivity between form, idea and the contextual forces that shape meaning. Put another way, a holistic understanding of content will qualitatively transform how we choose to leverage an online presence to say what we intend.



Key facets of an effective content strategy:

1. Editorial
2. Interactive
3. Visual
4. Access

## An Effective Content Strategy

Doing this with any success will need an overarching content strategy. Buchholz describes the four primary areas within the ambit of 'content' that have an influence on how meaning is interpreted. They are:

*Editorial:* Text, grammar, punctuation, technical and affective meaning

*Interactive:* Hyper linking, forms, files, animation, streaming media

*Visual:* Layout, design, colors, images, fonts, dynamic elements

*Access:* Universal designs, browser compatibility, download times, language level

An effective content strategy, attempts to coalesce all these facets into a single voice. Content managers must be attentive to any tendency that privileges one facet unduly because this would inevitably return to the tautology of content being 'something inside something else that is also content'.

## How a CMS can Help

Managing such a broad definition of content effectively is no small matter. And to do it across large organizations with an enormous amount of data can be well nigh impossible without an effective, automated, scalable and intricately customizable management system.

At first glance, a CMS that typically uses 'dynamic publishing' to conveniently extract data chunks from their original form and redeploy them in other contexts, may appear reductionist in its approach to content. But this is more a failure at the level of insight and intention of content managers rather than the CMS itself. A CMS is primarily about integration. In theory, it provides a far more adequate platform for managing the holistic definition of content hinted at earlier. A lot however hinges on the content strategy of the provider. But once this strategy is formulated, a good CMS will be able to facilitate a cohesive practical technology solution to managing the key facets of online communication with the unity it deserves.

A CMS has more than a few intrinsic capabilities and benefits that lend themselves excellently to managing content from this perspective. Here are a few:

1. Archival and search: Content management systems are designed to serve as excellent searchable repositories of content and efficient archival. This is great because it enables the consumer to interact with current content in the context of what has been said before.
2. Workflow management: Most CMSs include full-featured digital asset management capabilities. With control over any media type and publishing firepower that extends across multiple servers, assets can be managed with great efficacy across their entire lifecycles. Powerful workflow features allow digital assets to be used, rearranged and prioritized intuitively in accordance with the overall content strategy.
3. Interactivity: The essence of the Web is about linking, sharing and collaboration. Productivity and value creation is driven by cooperation. That is why content management is so important. With the sophisticated Web analytics that come with a good CMS, content can begin to breathe and respond to the dynamics of the consumer. Providers who enjoy 360° visibility of their online presence will be able to initiate appropriate actions that implement their content strategy.
4. Information architecture: As seen earlier, the visual and structural elements of a Web site also provide meaning and it is vital to have them tightly monitored and synched in to the editorial aspects of the site. Good information flows depend on a seamless alignment of both and a CMS offers many features to do this.

## Benefits of a SaaS Solution

The Software-as-a-service (SaaS) model of content management is radical development in the CMS market. It clearly provides a well-rounded, convenient and persuasive alternative to the typical CMS solution. The benefits in the areas of maintenance, support, scalability and cost benefits are obvious. But is there any advantage to an on demand option in the context of managing 'content' across its redefined scope? The answer is a yes, though the benefits are likely to be realized in a more indirect fashion.

A hosted CMS that helps companies manage multiple digital assets from a centralized interface, and adopts a 'best-in-breed' approach can give clients excellent control over customization with minimal hassles and risk. This should free clients from procedural tasks that divert resources from creating content, envisaging the scope of its form-meaning, gaining alignment with their content strategy and monitoring how it is being interpreted across their Web sites. The SaaS model also squarely places responsibility on the service provider to upgrade and match technology to meet the latest challenges of implementing a client's content strategy effectively.

## Conclusion

Content, contrary to our colloquial notion is not 'something that is inside something else'. It is what holds something together, and in the case of the Internet, it is what embodies meaning. Just as ideas and form are necessarily, logically and philosophically connected, so also the experience and interpretation of meaning is dependent on the editorial, visual, interactive and practical facets of 'content'.

Companies or content providers who realize the need for a broader and more holistic concept of content must evolve an appropriate content strategy to ensure that they are getting across exactly what they want to be saying.

A CMS provides an ideal platform for effective, enterprise wide implementation of this strategy. Any good CMS (and even more so a SaaS CMS) is well equipped to nurture the potentialities of content in the dynamic online milieu. But the CMS can do this only when somebody who recognizes the scope of true 'content' management adequately puts it to work.

Providers, who can leverage it well, will undoubtedly enjoy stronger and more rewarding online relationships with consumers.

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