

Content as Conversation in Government Websites

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Abstract. Thinking of content as conversation is a very powerful way to plan, organize, write, and test websites. Early government websites seemed to be built as if they were virtual file cabinets – offering people access to paper documents. Today, that metaphor is dead. A better metaphor is to think of websites as replacing the telephone. Using a case study of transforming a government website, I show how thinking of content as conversation and planning for customer-focused purposes, customer personas, and customers' questions can help government writers give people what they need in words they understand. I also show how walking personas through their conversations is a powerful review technique and how content as conversation helps in planning for usability testing.

Keywords: content, content as conversation, content strategy, government, personas, websites, web content, writing for the web, usability.

1 Usability = Find, Understand, Act

A website is useful and usable only if the people who come to it can

- find what they need,
- understand what they find, and
- act appropriately on that understanding

in the time and effort that they think it is worth.¹

1.1 People Come to Websites for the Content

What people want to find and understand at government websites are

- answers to questions
- where and how to complete transactions
- where and how to offer an opinion or participate in social media

¹ This definition comes from [1], based on an earlier definition in [2]. It is also the basis of the official U.S. government definition of plain language. See <http://www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/guidelines/FederalPLGuidelines/index.cfm> and <http://www.plainlanguage.gov/whatisPL/index.cfm>

All of that is content. People come to websites for content – not for the “joy” of navigating or searching, not to admire the design, not to focus on the technology.

Of course, navigation and search must work well for people to find what they need. Design can help or hinder both finding and understanding. And the technology must not get in the way. But good navigation, search, design, and technology are all there to support site visitors easily finding and understanding the content.

1.2 Every Use of Every Website Is a Conversation

Think about every use of a government (or any other) website as a conversation that the site visitor starts[1], [3], [4].

The most common early metaphor for websites (particularly government websites) was the file cabinet. But that’s the wrong metaphor. People don’t come to websites for documents. They come for information.

The best metaphor for websites is the telephone. Websites replace human voice customer service. We create websites because we expect people to handle their needs themselves instead of calling.

2 Good Content Requires Planning: Purposes, Personas, Conversations

The overall plan for content on a website is now being called content strategy [5], [6]. Content strategy is a high-level plan that covers governance, resources, messages, style, tone, and more. Within a government agency, a content strategy can be for a specific division or office or an entire agency.

The broader the reach of a content strategy, the better. People coming to a government website just want their information. They don’t care where in the organization that information is or who is responsible for it.

Inconsistencies from one part of the organization to another in message, design, or style for similar types of information for the same site visitors may hinder and frustrate those visitors. Thus, an important objective of content strategy is to break down silos.²

2.1 Planning Must Happen at Every Level

Content strategy is a high-level plan that often includes:

- A content inventory (what content is now on the site)
- A content audit (what should go, stay as is, change)

² Within a successful content strategy, you may have differences in messages, design, and style for different types of information or different types of site visitors. For example, many government agencies have a special site for children. For a second example, the U.S. National Cancer Institute has two levels of information on each type of cancer – one primarily for patients and their families and the other primarily for health professionals. Everyone can get to both sets of information, but the reading level and vocabulary assumptions for the two levels are different.

- A content calendar (what content is to come, on what schedule, and who is responsible for it)

But planning cannot stop at that high level. Every piece of content must not only fit within the content strategy. It must itself have a plan that includes:

- What the organization wants to achieve through this content (purposes)
- Who the content is for (personas)
- What site visitors' needs the content will satisfy (conversations)³ [1]

2.2 Purposes: Stating Clearly What the Content Will Help People Do

If most people come to a government website to get the answer to a question or to accomplish a task, writers must be able to frame what they are writing to focus on site visitors and what they will do. The most successful web content comes from writers who can state what they want to achieve in terms that are

- specific, [7]
- measurable, and
- focused on what the writer wants the site visitor to do [8]

2.3 Personas: Knowing Who Will Come to the Content

If content = conversation, the writer must know about the people who will come to that content. We capture that knowledge in personas [9], [10].

Government websites, of course, are open to everyone. But everyone is not the relevant site visitor for all government content. We can be more specific for specific content. For example, parts of the website of the U.S. Social Security Administration are for people who need help because they are disabled and cannot work even though they are not elderly. Other parts are for people who are in their 60s and older. Both of those groups include many people with special needs that web teams must consider – problems in literacy, memory, mobility, vision, and so on.

For any persona, we should, in fact, think in terms of their typical abilities, aptitudes, and attitudes. Abilities = Do they have problems with language, literacy, memory, vision, and so on? Aptitudes = How comfortable are they with the device they are using? With the Internet in general? What features of a browser do they typically use? Attitudes = How easily do they get frustrated? Are they tired when they come for this information? How busy are they? How quickly do they expect to find and understand the information?⁴

³ For examples of well-stated plans, see the case study in this paper and the examples in [1], [3], and [4].

⁴ The 3As model for thinking about site visitors (Ability, Aptitude, Attitude) is based on research about older adults and websites that the author did in the mid-2000s with Dana Chisnell. That research was sponsored by AARP, the U.S. organization that invites everyone 50 years and older to join. The model was originally developed with age as a fourth A [11], [12], [13]. Chisnell later realized that the other 3As apply across all ages and not only to the older adults who are AARP's primary concern [14].

A persona is an exemplar, representing and humanizing a group of site visitors. For designers, developers, and writers in government agencies, who typically do not get to interact directly with their website's visitors, personas make those site visitors part of the team. You can see examples of personas for government agencies at http://usability.gov/methods/analyze_current/personas.html.

2.4 Conversations: Hearing What the Site Visitor Is Asking

Successful web content comes from "channeling" the site visitor – hearing and responding to the conversation that the site visitor brings. Government (and other) writers too often focus on the content itself, thinking "I have all this to say." But the most successful web content comes from turning from that internal focus to the conversational: "What questions will people have about my topic?"

Where can you learn about those questions? Sometimes, just imagining a person coming to the content and thinking about what's in that person's mind can get a writer started.

Sources of actual data also exist. Although web teams in many government agencies don't have direct contact with site visitors, others in the agency do. Who takes calls? What are people calling about? What questions are they asking? What words are they using in those questions? Who reads what people send when they use Contact Us on the website? What are people searching for on the website and what words do they use in their searches? Analyzing site search can be very useful, as Louis Rosenfeld explains [15].

Of course, sometimes, the questions you can imagine site visitors asking don't cover everything they need to know. Great content combines the organization's key messages on the topic with the answers to site visitors' questions.

3 A Case Study Shows the Value of Content as Conversation

Typical site visitors are willing to spend only a small amount of time trying to get what they need. In an extensive study of many sites (including government sites) by Jakob Nielsen and Hoa Loranger, the average time people spent was:

- Home page – 25 – 35 seconds
- Interior page – 45 – 60 seconds
- Deciding that a site isn't going to help them and abandoning that site – less than 2 minutes [16]

Thinking of content as conversation helps us remember that the web is a tool for site visitors to accomplish a goal – a goal that they could also accomplish in other ways that would be more costly for the government (by phone, in person, by mail).

A case study shows the value of seeing content as conversation for government websites.

3.1 Helping Customers File a Complaint against a Bank

In the United States, the federal Office of the Comptroller of the Currency (OCC) regulates national banks, which are different from state-chartered banks and credit

unions. One of OCC's functions is to take complaints about the banks it regulates and help customers who have problems with one of those banks.

When I wrote the first edition of *Letting Go of the Words*, I pointed to the OCC content that then existed for this function. (See Fig. 1.)

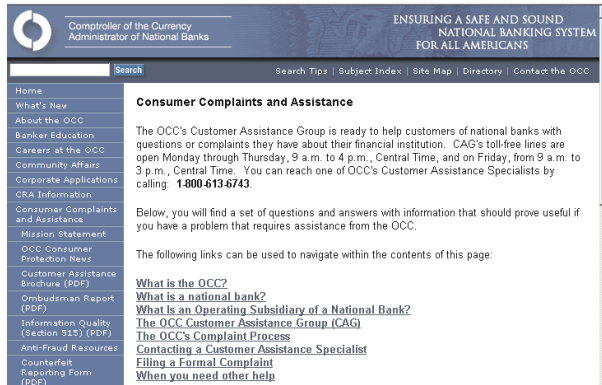


Fig. 1. The U.S. Office of the Comptroller of the Currency used to present this content to site visitors who came saying, "I want to complain about my bank."

Seeing Problems in this Example. The title, Consumer Complaints and Assistance, uses three nouns. It has no verb – no call to action or recognition of an action that site visitors want to take. It doesn't join a conversation with the site visitor.

The first sentence is impersonal, not conversational: "The OCC's Customer Assistance Group is ready to help customers of national banks with questions or complaints they have with their financial institution." Although the writers start to talk to people ("you") later in the paragraph, that first sentence is in the third person ("customers"..."they"). The first sentence is about the organization. It doesn't acknowledge that the site visitor started a conversation.

The telephone number in bold jumps off the screen. Site visitors who are quickly scanning may immediately call only to find out that the OCC doesn't regulate their bank and can't help them. They haven't yet been walked through the information they need to find out if this is the right place for them to complain.

The text further down answers questions, and questions are an excellent technique for content as conversation. But these questions aren't the ones that site visitors would be asking. Questions like "What is the OCC?" focus on the organization. The site visitor's question this is trying to answer is, "Is this the right place for my complaint?"

Planning. To revise this and other parts of the OCC site, the web team went through an extensive content strategy project. For this content, they realized that the purposes, persona, and conversation were different from most of the OCC site.

The primary *purposes* of this topic are to take complaints about a national bank and to help people go to the right place to complain if OCC does not regulate their bank.

The primary *persona* for this topic is a bank customer who probably does not know about the OCC or think of it as the place for their complaint. Furthermore, bank customers aren't the OCC's primary personas. Bank owners and managers are. For many OCC personas, banking language *is* plain language. For bank customers coming to complain, that same language is likely to be jargon and not plain.

Also, imagine the persona of a bank customer who wants to complain. The adjectives that come to mind are likely to be "angry," "frustrated," "unhappy." When they see the information on the OCC home page, which is correctly meant primarily for other personas, they may not feel welcome. And they may not easily find the path to what they need.

The primary *conversation* for this topic is "I want someone to hear my complaint and do something about it. How do I complain about my bank?"

Revising. From that planning, the team created an entirely new and different site for these purposes, persona, and conversation. Its URL is www.helpwithmybank.gov. Fig. 2 is the page on that site related to complaining about a national bank.

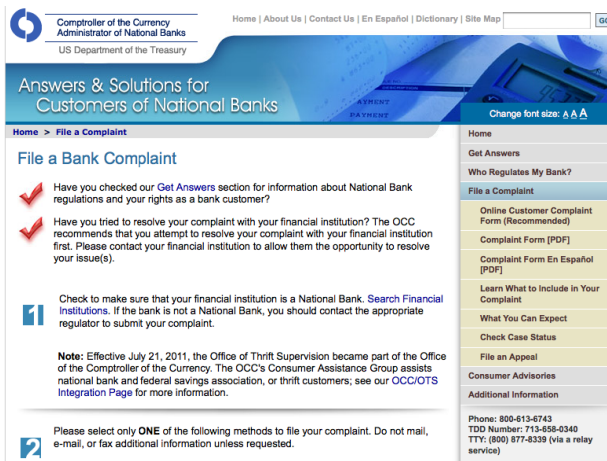


Fig. 2. The U.S. Office of the Comptroller of the Currency created a new site to converse with people who have a problem with their bank. The URL, www.helpwithmybank.com, provides great search engine optimization (SEO) for the search people in this situation are likely to do.

Noticing the Changes. The title now is a verb phrase that matches what site visitors want to do. The page immediately joins the site visitor's conversation.

- Site visitor: I want to complain about my bank.
- Website: We hear you. This is the page about "File a Bank Complaint." You probably have some questions about banks and your rights. Have you checked our answers to people's typical questions about that? And have you tried to resolve the problem at the bank?

- Site visitor: Yes, I've done both of those. (Or: I'm not going to do that, just tell me how to complain.)
- Website: Okay. We'll give you steps to follow. The first is that you have to know that your bank is a national bank. Here's a link to find out if it is. If it isn't, you have to contact someone else.

(One improvement that would help the conversation even more would be to make the phrase "contact the appropriate regulator" into a link that goes to information on "Who regulates my bank?" That question is in the right hand navigation, but most site visitors won't see it. It belongs as a link where the writers mention it in Step 1.)

4 Successful Conversations Are in Plain Language

Note how clear and plain the writing is in the "after" version of this case study. Writing conversationally is writing as you speak. If you think of websites as replacing the phone (not the file cabinet), writing as you speak makes great sense as the best way to write web content. When you talk to someone, you use pronouns (I, we, you). You keep your sentences short. You take turns with the other person in the conversation. You generally speak in the active voice (where you say who is doing the action before you say what the action is). You give people instructions with imperative verbs. All these ways of speaking are also hallmarks of writing in plain language.

4.1 U.S. Law Requires Plain Language from Government Agencies

The Plain Writing Act of 2010, which requires U.S. federal agencies to communicate with the public in plain language, covers all communications, except regulations⁵ [17]. Many other countries have laws and regulations mandating plain language. Several have active plain language programs [8], [19].

The official U.S. guidelines for plain language use a definition that is built on the three points with which I opened this paper: "...your users can find what they need, understand what they find, and use what they find to meet their needs" [20].

4.2 Research Shows That Plain Language Improves Legal Information

Some may argue that government topics are too technical, scientific, legal, and complex to be in plain language. Not true. Legal documents can and should be legally accurate, legally sufficient, and also clear and usable. Clarity improves accuracy and precision.

Unclear information is sometimes not as legally accurate as government lawyers want it to be. Joseph Kimble, a law professor who researches and writes about clear

⁵ President Obama signed an Executive Order in 2011 requiring that regulations be in plain language [18]. For more on the Plain Writing Act of 2010 and the Executive Order of 2011 as well as the official guidelines for plain language in U.S. government writing, see www.plainlanguage.gov. The Center for Plain Language also has useful and relevant information at www.centerforplainlanguage.org.

legal writing, has collected many examples of plain language in legal documents, as well as many case studies showing the value of plain language [21].

4.3 Research Shows that Plain Language Helps Everyone

Others may argue that plain language means dumbing down the writing and will bother high literacy site visitors. Not true. Writing plainly is respecting busy site visitors' time. Research by Kathryn and Michael Summers clearly shows that revising a website to help low literacy site visitors helps high literacy site visitors even more [22].

5 Conversation Works Well in Evaluating Websites

Human-computer interaction specialists (and user experience professionals) have long known that testing early and often with representative users is the best way to know that a website works for the people who must or should use it [2] [23 - 28]. Content as conversation helps prepare for good usability testing because the elements of planning for content as conversation give you the elements for planning a usability test.

- If you have specified purposes well, you know what you want to find out: Can people achieve what you have stated in answering the question, "What do you want people to achieve through this content?"
- If you have personas, you know the types of people you want to bring in to the usability test.
- If you have thought about the conversations they want to start, you have the stories to put into your usability test scenarios.

You can usability test a website at any stage – from testing an old site before revising it to testing a new site in an early prototype and then again as you develop it further. But even before doing any usability testing, you can use content as conversation as a method for reviewing the site. Rather than doing an expert review or a heuristic analysis, walk your personas through their conversations [1], [29].

6 Content as Conversation Is Becoming Even More Important

We have been talking about "government websites" and you may be visualizing a large monitor on your office desk. But websites aren't only on desktop computers and large screens. Content has to work well on laptops, tablets, and mobile phones, in sites and in apps. People move from device to device. Many are coming into the on-line world on mobiles without ever having had access to laptops. We must embrace the concepts of what Sara Wachter-Boettcher calls "content everywhere" [30] and Karen McGrane calls "adaptive content" [31].

Your content has to work well in all these devices at all these screen sizes, and you won't be able to write and maintain different versions for each experience. As screens get smaller with less in view at any one time, content as conversation – just the information people need at the moment they need it to answer the question of the moment – is going to be the best way to assure successful communication.

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