

CREATING A POWERFUL CONTENT STRATEGY: THE FIVE STEPS OF CONNECTING TO AND RETAINING YOUR AUDIENCE

This white paper was written by Amy Fox of Street Relations and Carol Summerfield of TeamWorks Media based on decades of experience in marketing institutions of higher learning and healthcare. They, and their respective agencies, bring a deep understanding of branding, the digital space, and audience engagement, having worked with a wide range of educational and healthcare clients. More information, including how to contact each of them, is available at the end of this white paper.

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We believe that an authentic narrative, told well, is the most effective tool in marketing. Authentic narratives separate and elevate. Inspire. Engage. How do you know what will resonate most with your core audiences?

The following five steps will help you better navigate the complex and ever-changing world of content strategy. We are excited to share our hard-earned lessons with you, no strings attached.

STEP 1: IDENTIFY YOUR AUDIENCE'S NEEDS

WHO ARE THEY AND WHAT ARE THEY LOOKING FOR?

Do you know your audience as well as you need to? Here's a quiz to see:

- When someone asks you who your audience is, can you give a more specific answer than "everyone"?
- Can you describe a day in the life of your core audience(s)?
- Have you ever "secret shopped" your services, website, or application process to see what their experience is?

- Do you know the number one question on your audience’s mind when they contact you? Are you sure?

If you answered “no” to any one of these questions, then you have work to do. Because here’s what not knowing gets you:

The broader your audience, the less tailored your message. The less tailored your message, the less interesting you are.

This is what we call the “Mickey Mouse” problem. He’s a great icon for a brand, but he’s a bust as a narrative asset. Sure, you’ll buy his image on a watch, but are you watching his films? No, probably not. Why? Because, he’s an everyman. Everyman icons are devoid of any personality. They are the embodiment of someone you’d avoid at a party. Big Bird is an everyman. Intended to be the main focus of Sesame Street, he was upstaged by Elmo because Elmo has personality.

Bland should never be synonymous with brand.

If you approach your content with the rigidity of an encyclopedia entry, striving to be clear, concise, informative, and neutral, then you’ve stripped your brand of personality.

If you don’t know what obstacles and challenges your audience faces each day, you aren’t seen as a “partner” to them, sitting on the same side of the table with them, helping them solve their problems, find their path, or get to a solution.

People support brands that support them and their needs and that includes the content you provide.

We recommend you approach your content the same way you’d approach a date. If all you do is talk about yourself, you’re a terrible date.

What’s your audience interested in? What keeps them up at night?

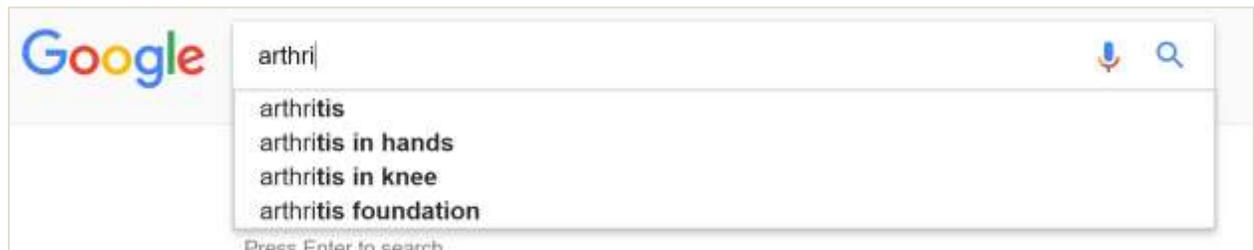
If your entire social media feed is about what’s happening tonight, this week, or next weekend at your institution, then you are only talking to the people already engaged in your organization. One key goal of your social media should be to engage a larger audience than your current audience. It’s one of the most effective and least expensive tools in your arsenal.

WHAT IS YOUR AUDIENCE LOOKING FOR AND NOT FINDING?

This is the hardest thing to discern and it’s the most critical. There are gaps in everyone’s journey. It could be they need medical information, and what they find is scattered, unreliable or not really an answer to their question. If they’re prospective students, it’s great you have a 7:1, 10:1 or 14:1 ratio of students to teachers. Is that what they want to know about your faculty? Is that your faculty’s big selling point?

So how do you find out what they are looking for?

- A) Do a search yourself. See what pops up as the Google prompts when you type in the first word or two. Dig in. See how hard it is to get some basic questions answered. Check the veracity of information out there—how much is wrong? And finally, watch some of the videos, read through the articles. Are they engaging? Did you get to the end or did you tune out part-way through?



- B) Need more data? Run a quantitative study. There are plenty of companies that can help you and it's less costly than it has ever been.
- C) Check social media comments on a subject. See what people are complaining about. And remember, people are significantly more likely to complain about something publicly than they are to compliment something. Take complaints as a weighted measure.

One thing to keep in mind, though, is your audience might not even realize what they're missing. Because it's nowhere to be found.

WHAT YOU CAN PROVIDE

This gets to the core of what you should be communicating. And, like in the book *The Lord of the Rings*, where they've finally thrown the evil ring into Mount Doom, you look down and realize you still have 250 pages to go. Wait, you think. What else do they have to do, JRR Tolkien?

How can the subject matter of the content only be Step 1?

Because that's where we start. The "topic" is just the entry point of developing a powerful content strategy. Establishing what you can own as subject matter is critical, but there's a lot more that goes into being successful.

STEP 2: DEFINE YOUR PARAMETERS

DON'T START SOMETHING YOU CAN'T FINISH

Once you've selected what you can own as a topic, you need to put some serious boundaries around it. If you try to boil the ocean, you will fail. Realistically evaluating what you can accomplish is critical to success. You also have to evaluate how much content is enough for your audience.

You can develop daily materials, pushing something new out each day or even several times a day. We have a few clients who have us produce their daily content, where we identify, develop, write and promote the stories, both written and video. We also have clients who only do content once a week. Occasionally we have one who wants twice-monthly content, but that's a pretty thin content plan, and the results tend to reflect it.

BORROW OR "BUILD AND BRAND"?

The first thing to decide is how much of what you are going to do is going to be original, and how much is going to be "borrowed." Creating content is labor intensive if you have to do it with your internal team. And chances are your internal team already has a full-time job doing whatever their job description requires.

There are several options for creating your content:

Hiring an outside agency to develop the content on a permanent basis, with your approval.

Here are the advantages:

- Your time commitment reduces as they get to know your brand voice and the parameters on what you deem appropriate content.
- It also puts nominal burden on your staff.
- You can set an extremely high quality bar.

Hiring an outside agency to develop the initial push of content, and your team takes over after the first blush. The benefit of this is you get a volume of content initially to create buzz in the marketplace, and you then can run a maintenance model with a smaller volume of content moving forward. The agency can also build out the brand voice, allowing you to use staff you trust to follow the template to get it right.

Building the materials internally. This works if you have a robust staff with great writing skills (or video skills if you need visually compelling stories). You may have the expertise, but they need to have the time and the talent to translate that expertise into public-facing engaging content.

Paying to use already written materials. The option is available if the level of quality you want is already out there to be bought, but isn't so ubiquitous as to be pointless to bring it under your brand. Make sure your target audience hasn't already seen or read it elsewhere.

EVERGREEN AND ROTATIONAL CONTENT

As you build out your content model, you want to consider what blend of information is permanent and what is transitory. Both can remain on your site for the duration. Each has a specific role for your audience, and each has a set shelf-life for use.

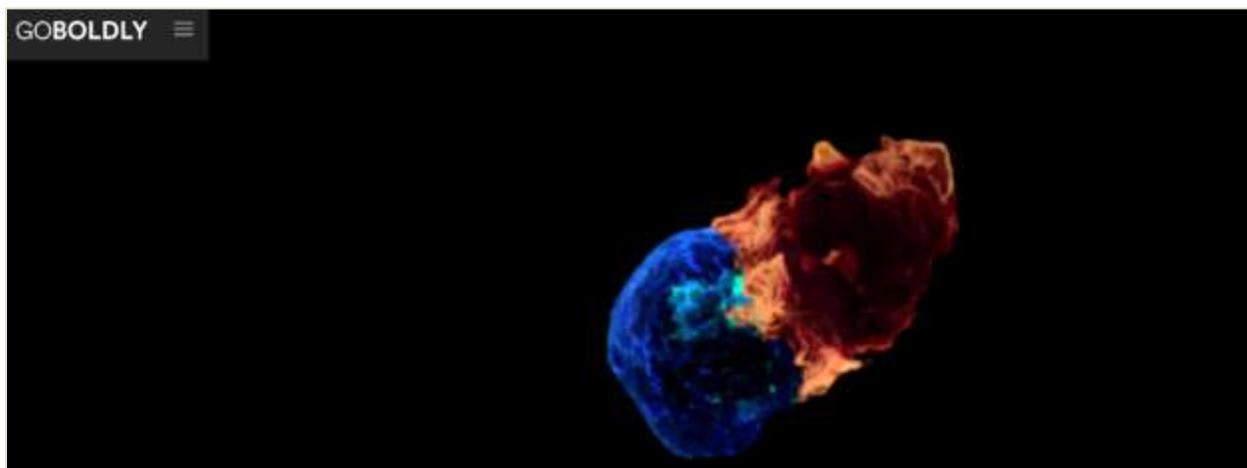
Permanent information is reference-based. This is the “must know” material. If you are offering up information on disease treatment and management, then it stays on as long as it's accurate. Once the material is produced, it only needs to be changed out when protocols change. Keep in mind, even permanent information needs to be emotionally engaging and authentic.

You can produce dry and clinical, but chances are good that's already out there. It's not setting you apart and it's probably not what your audience wants from you.

Rotational content is time-based. This can be profiles of your faculty, or a new invention or a success story. They are sharable when they first hit the social media feed, but the stories, local heroes, new initiatives, seasonal topics age out, just like a newspaper. Rotational content should be the most emotionally compelling and engaging content you produce. It doesn't have to be long. It doesn't have to be complicated. It does have to have a soul.

This example shows how a simple voice-over with a single graphic can pull you into something as complex and challenging as fighting cancer, with emotion and authenticity and elegance.

<https://goboldly.com/cells-one>



STEP 3: BUILD IT

YOUR SITE, A NEW SITE, RENTAL SPACE ON ANOTHER SITE

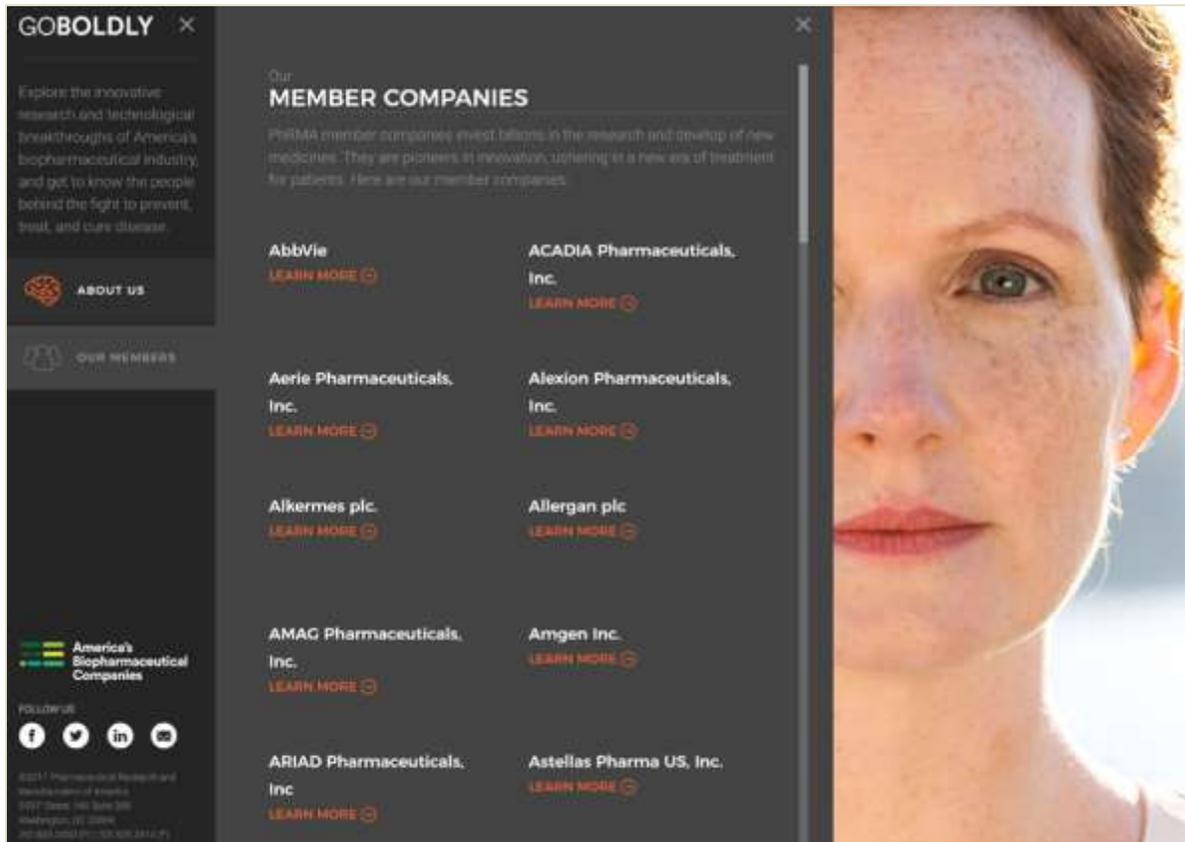
Once you've gotten an idea of what you are going to focus on, and how often and what sort of stories are going to make up your content, you have to decide where it's going to live. The obvious and easy choice is to put it on your institution's site. And that might, in fact, be the right decision. It also might not be.

You can build a new site, with a new name, and let that site create its own following. How, you then ask, does that help my brand?

Because by providing value to your audience, your consumer, and your community without being a sledgehammer about yourself, you gain an aura of altruistic contributor to the community good. They'll know it's you, even if you aren't branding it in 86-point font.

Setting up a new entity to be the bearer of the narrative isn't complex or costlier than modifying your current site.

By providing a site that talks about your audience's core concern, as an independent entity, you are showing you are putting their needs first.



Again, look at the sponsors for Go Boldy.

Their names aren't the headline. In fact, you have to go to a pull-down menu to find the list. And in tiny type on the left side of the page, it reads:

©2017 Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America
950 F Street, NW Suite 300
Washington, DC 20004
202.835.3400 (P) | 202.835.3414 (F)

That's some impressive soft pedaling of the actual individual sponsoring organizations of a website focused on public-facing knowledge sharing.

You can also decide to create a section within your site that covers your topic. Mayo Clinic made the investment years ago to become one of the leading public authorities on medicine, on behalf of patients well beyond the reach of the Mayo institutions. They wanted to be the quintessential expert on numerous diseases. They invested in a robust content play, which lives on their site.

The screenshot shows the top portion of the Mayo Clinic website. At the top left is the Mayo Clinic logo. To its right is a search bar labeled 'Search Mayo Clinic'. Further right are links for 'Request an Appointment', 'Find a Doctor', 'Find a Job', and 'Give Now'. On the far right, there is a 'Log in to Patient Account' link, a language selector set to 'English', and social media icons for Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. Below this is a horizontal navigation menu with categories: 'PATIENT CARE & HEALTH INFO', 'DEPARTMENTS & CENTERS', 'RESEARCH', 'EDUCATION', 'FOR MEDICAL PROFESSIONALS', 'PRODUCTS & SERVICES', and 'GIVING TO MAYO CLINIC'. The main content area features a large banner with a photograph of a scientist in a lab coat looking through a microscope. The text on the banner reads 'HELP MAYO CLINIC FIND NEW CURES' in large white letters, followed by 'Mayo Clinic research is putting new cures within reach, but we need your help.' and a blue 'Give Today' button with a right-pointing arrow. Below the banner are three columns of text: 'Patient care and health information' (with a sub-headline 'More than 3,300 physicians, scientists and researchers from Mayo Clinic share their expertise to empower you. Find out why Mayo Clinic is the right place for your health care.'), 'International Services' (with a sub-headline 'Thousands of people from around the world travel to Mayo Clinic locations in Arizona, Florida and Minnesota each year for medical care.' and a link 'International Services at Mayo Clinic Request an Appointment'), and 'Appointments' (with a sub-headline 'Mayo Clinic accepts appointments in Arizona, Florida and Minnesota and at Mayo Clinic Health System sites.' and a link 'Request an Appointment').

Because of their diligent efforts, Mayo Clinic has elevated their brand worldwide and improved their rankings and their profitability.

You can also decide to find a site whose reputation aligns with your needs and create content for that site. There are numerous financial arrangements you can make with partner sites. Your goal is to ensure that it's an elevation of brands on both sides of the partnership.

This can be a different model than sponsored content, which functions like what we used to call advertorials. If you provide an authentic voice that isn't shilling a product, you can be the holder of the magic key: independent, valuable content that is seen as objective and well-researched.

YOUR VOICE: BE HUMAN

There are very few people who sit down to read an encyclopedia because they enjoy it. (They are out there. Trust us, we worked at encyclopedia companies. They do exist and they are avid letter-writers. But they are rare.)

Don't be encyclopedic. That role is already taken.

Be real. We know the word authentic is overused, even in this white paper. It's still meaningful.

If your content is all head and no heart, you're not living up to your potential in connecting to your audience. Make them care. Caring leads to action.

There are all sorts of guidelines about what length content should be, and whether it should be video or not, voice-over or subtitled, embedded with infographics or images. The reality is those "truths" tend to change (and change quickly) in the new world order of social media. In step 5, we explain how to navigate. For this step, we want you focused on how you're saying it. What's your tone and your narrative approach?

You'd be amazed at how a little personality gets rewarded by loyalty of an audience, even a brand that's taken a beating in previous years.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGPbKS8XUMY>

See the creative campaign approach to a big topic #YOU CAN BE ANYTHING. Note the buy-in and trust created with this simple humor and care. Yes, it's about Barbie, and it is also about relationships, and education, and health, and space, and the idea that for today's little girls, the sky's the limit.

STEP 4: AMPLIFY IT

IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY MIGHT NOT COME

At this point, we're sure you feel like you've done all the heavy lifting. You've figured out your content strategy, the content approach, who's doing the writing and the filming, and even who's going to host the content. Surely, you think to yourself, once it's loaded up on the site, we're done here.

Nope.

If you decided to host a dinner party for your neighbors and all you did to invite them was hang a sign on your front door, do you think you'd get a lot of guests? You'd probably only get the

people standing at your front door. Now, if you happen to be an amazing cook and one of your closest neighbors sees the note, he might run through the neighborhood letting everyone know. But he might not.

It's the same with your content. Once you've gotten this far, you still need to go to where your audience is. You can't wait for them to come to you.

STEPPING UP YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA GAME

The fastest way to do that is through social media. Depending on your audience and your content, that can mean being on one site like Facebook, or being on several. It also means the content on each of the social media sites needs to be modulated for that delivery tool. Facebook isn't Twitter isn't Instagram isn't Pinterest. They all have their sweet spots of what works. So once your core content is done, you need a specific strategy on how to promote your content within each media outlet you are using.

Bell's "Let's Talk" fund-raising campaign to raise awareness on mental illness and its lingering stigma is a one day media blast with high traffic and incredible content sharing.

The program works across multiple social media. They focus their energy on a single day push, every year. Their core tools are on Twitter and Facebook. Their key message is to drive sharing, by offering a donation for everyone who uses the hashtag #BellLetsTalk. The goal is to entice people to find out more. They didn't fall into the trap of trying to jam the entire campaign strategy into a hashtag. The words mental illness or stigma aren't part of the hash tag. Readers have to dig in to find out why it's trending. Creativity, brave decision-making by their marketing team, and perseverance have netted them a highly successful program that gives their brand an enormous boost in Canada and beyond.



STEP 5: MONITOR, MODIFY, MAXIMIZE

WHAT'S THE ROI?

Think about your expectations and measurements of the audience engagement. Think about the path your audience is going to navigate.

What is the call to action?

- Are you asking them to just like and share your content on social media?
- Are you trying to drive behavioral change?
- Is there a concrete action plan you want your audience to take?

A stellar social media campaign has the power to do multiple things, virtually simultaneously, and will continue dynamically if you are resonating with your messaging and ask. Note the clever and successful #YESMAMM campaign run by Carillion Clinic to promote breast care and mammography screenings. There's a specific call-to-action: get a mammogram. Note, they aren't saying "Get a mammogram at Carillion Clinic." They aren't advocating for their specific clinic. When more people get mammograms, they benefit along with other medical centers. When you look at the #YESMAMM campaign materials, you are likely to find multiple hospitals now using it.



Here's the credit they can take: increasing the number of women who get mammograms increases early detection. Early detection saves lives. Saving lives benefits everyone in their community. This makes Carillion Clinic a great community partner, which elevates their brand.

Measurement isn't always going to be directly in dollars or members or applications to attend a school. Sometimes it's measured in the massive brand image improvement that keeps your audience loyal and engaged.

Carillion does also benefit in direct dollar spend. The campaign is still going strong after five years, because they've adjusted and improved the communication, from utilizing Twitter to answer common questions, to simplifying how consumers can make appointments while it's top of mind through links to their website.



MEASUREMENT: ARE VIEWS ENOUGH?

Depending upon your audience, views can be a great thing. But you may still need to create a call to action or an engagement model. How can you help someone get back into shape, lose weight, or commit to some component of a healthier lifestyle, if you are a medical center?

Quality social media materials for audiences is quickly changing social media adoption rates. Take a deeper dive into your social media engagement and your investment in quality online materials and this can translate into your ability to network with students sharing research and patients empowered to manage a myriad of factors in their healthcare. Individuals trust the resources within their network. Which takes us to:

SHARING IS CARING

Consumers trust the opinions of others. Once you have created your model, follow what is getting shared and what isn't. Remember a high tide lifts all boats, and you can create a halo effect when your messaging speaks to the genuine care. Success can largely be valued on the "use" of sharing this necessary information with others.

Your audience liking your content is great, but sharing has more value. Gaining the second ring out from the people who already follow you is one of the prime objectives of social media. Sharing is one of the best ways to get there.

Infographics are a great way to present complex and complicated topics and are highly shareable. Images with short embedded quotes and captions also get shared. Well-structured

short videos with caption get watched. There are a million “best practices” you can follow, and the best way to identify your own best practices is to monitor and tweak.

MISTAKES WILL BE MADE AND THAT'S A GOOD THING.

Just remember there is beauty in the fast fail and social media allows you to monitor easily and quickly what is working and not working with your core audience or core audiences.

ARE YOU EVER DONE?

Nope. Keep your content informed, engaging, and manageable. Modulate and maintain your dynamic presence in the public sphere with relevant, connected, strong narratives. You gain engagement with phenomenal content that is targeted to your audience’s needs and interests, built from your expertise and knowledge.

Remember good quality, shared well, brings rewards.

AUTHORS

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