

Ramp up your website with effective web content

7 Steps to Effective Web Content

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# *7 STEPS* to Effective Web Content

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how to be web-word savvy  
& do more business with your website  
*INCLUDES* hands-on exercises to get you started now!



by Elizabeth Short

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ELIZABETH SHORT

# PARTONE

The thing about websites



## The thing about websites

Back in the 1990s, there was a lot of buzz about digital reading materials replacing their printed predecessors—everything from books to brochures to broadsheets.

Those of us who adore the smell of ink on the page, the feel of paper between our fingers, the scholarly sight up dust jackets and tooled leather neat on a shelf, were horrified. Those who can't get enough of computer glare were ecstatic.

For good or ill, those early information age prophecies haven't come to pass, at least not completely. Although the digital revolution has indeed changed the way we conduct everyday life—and the way we do business—online materials, at least for now, present enough challenges to ensure the printed word will remain alive and well for some time to come.

You see, the thing about digital materials is that we relate to them differently than those in print. To employ them properly, we must first understand their limitations. Only then can we create a sound strategy for success—and reap the unique benefits of an online presence.

### PRINT MATERIALS

#### PROS

- Read on paper (easy on the eyes)
- Tangible
- Can be read anywhere
- Handed or delivered to us

#### CONS

- More expensive to produce
- More difficult to alter
- More difficult to search for

### WEB-BASED MATERIALS

#### PROS

- Less expensive to produce
- Easy to alter
- Easy to search for

#### CONS

- Read on computer screen (harder on the eyes)
- Intangible
- Not portable
- More anonymous

## PRINT VS. WEB-BASED MATERIALS

Print and web-based materials differ in many ways, some of them obvious and some more subtle. Let's start with the obvious. We read print-based materials on paper while web-based materials greet the eye via computers. An elementary fact, yet implications run deep—most people can tolerate focused reading on a computer screen for only short periods of time.

Second, print materials are tangible while their digital cousins lack the pleasant tactile sensation of paper on skin. The result? We're likely to have a more detached relationship to web-based materials, making us more prone to leaving than lingering.

Third, we can devour print materials anywhere—at a desk, on the couch, over a bowl of cereal in the kitchen. Web-based materials are far less portable and must be read in front of a computer. Just print them out, you say? This is indeed an option—for those who enjoy the jumbled formatting and otherwise poor reading quality that ensues.

Fourth, print materials seem to flock to us of their own accord. We pick them up in public places, find them in our mailbox, collect them at meetings. How easy is that! We find (or fail to find) websites, on the other hand, during anonymous online searches, after sifting among tens of thousands of competing pages.

## WHY BOTHER WITH A WEBSITE, THEN?

Of course, websites wouldn't be so popular if they didn't offer a number of powerful advantages. *Numero uno?* Searchability. Twenty years ago, your customer might have settled for the standard-issue tap dancing shoes advertised in the Sunday paper. But thanks to the Internet, he found a cheaper pair—complete with purple spangles and fluorescent pink bows—on your website (albeit after a half-hour search).

Then there's affordability—you can build an entire website for the cost of 1000 brochures. Plus, websites are easy and inexpensive to alter. Switch out text or graphics in your html editor, upload to your server and *voila!* Finally, cyberspace is infinite. Your market can find out everything it ever wanted to know (and sometimes more) about your product or service.

But beyond the advantages and disadvantages of web-based materials, lies the essential fact that the public expects your business to have an online presence. The key, therefore, is not to debate the merits of this medium, but to employ it in smart ways.

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# Encounters of an online kind

Now that we understand the challenges and benefits of web-based materials, it's time to imagine what actually happens when your potential customers search the Internet. What do they find? How do they react?

## **INFORMATION AVALANCHE**

The first thing your potential customer is sure to encounter online is information. A lot of it. Let's say you sell heirloom seeds. How many hits does a Google search bring up in that category? About 851,000. Perhaps your potential customer thinks to qualify her search with the words "catalog" and "Northwest." Now your website is competing with only 45,099 other possibilities. Only?! Some call this information overload. A better term might be information avalanche—a virtual flurry of search engine hits that threatens to engulf even the most intrepid of cyberspace searchers.







### **THE RAT RACE**

Our world is a busy one and it seems to get busier every day. Although computers were supposed to give us more free time, we've simply ended up stuffing more activity into each waking hour.

Given our perpetual rush, it's no wonder that statistics show people typically spend about five seconds per website—unless they're somehow persuaded to linger. After all, thanks to information avalanche, they've got half a million hits to get through today!



### **I ~~♥~~ HATE READING**

Let's face it. People hate reading on computers. Our eyes get tired. Digital disco makes for migraines. We get cookie crumbs in the keyboard.

How do we survive? By scanning for information instead of actually reading. Sweeping along the bas-relief of headings and hyperlinks, we read only the few sentences or paragraphs we truly need to fulfill our search.

# EXERCISE 1

## IN YOUR CUSTOMER'S SHOES

Do you ever wonder what your potential customers encounter online? You should!

**What products or services do you offer:**

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**Conduct a Google search for your product or service. How many hits pop up? \_\_\_\_\_ How many hits if you refine your search with two additional terms? \_\_\_\_\_**

**Visit three websites from your search results. Explain 1) why you chose to click on each site and 2) your reactions**

site #1

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site #2

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site #3

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**Given the websites your customer will encounter online, list three things you'll do to your own website to make it the best of the bunch:**

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## EXAMPLES

### **Tap dancing shoes**

Hits: 1,310,000

### **Tap dancing shoes adult sizes**

Hits: 631,000

#### **Site #1:**

[www.mysimon.com](http://www.mysimon.com)

Chose because it mentioned Capezio brand. Liked that shoes were categorized by price as well as shoe type. Didn't like sparse descriptions.

#### **Site #2:**

[www.studio10dance.com](http://www.studio10dance.com)

Chose because it listed features. Loved detailed features and photos. Didn't like that I couldn't purchase shoes online.

#### **Site #3:**

[www.costumegallery.net](http://www.costumegallery.net)

Chose site because of accessories. Didn't like that I couldn't easily locate tap shoes or adult sizes.

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