7 steps for building your utility's content strategy

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Key takeaways

- A content strategy ensures you're producing content that solves customers' problems and meets your business objectives.
- To get started with a content strategy, identify a strength or weakness in your content production life cycle and focus on optimizing or fixing it.
- Include other teams in your content strategy project to get buy-in, support, and fresh ideas.
- Work toward a component-based content creation and management model to create efficiencies and prepare for new communication channels.
- Measure content performance by how effectively it achieves the goals you set for it.

Your content strategy guides how you create, distribute, and manage content to meet customer needs and support business objectives. You can produce content without a content strategy, but you'll end up creating inconsistent, off-brand, off-schedule, irrelevant content that doesn't have an audience or a purpose.

To help you build and mature your utility's content strategy, we recommend taking these seven steps:

1. Start somewhere
2. Collect input from customers and internal stakeholders
3. Identify your brand, audience, and messaging
4. Build a content team
5. Write reusable and discoverable content
6. Measure content performance
7. Govern your content

We identified these steps through our research, as well as through conversations and collaboration with these content experts:

- Blaine Kyllo, former senior strategist at Content Strategy Inc.
- Caroline Aoyagi-Stom, digital content strategist at Southern California Edison (SCE)
- Noz Urbina, founder of Urbina Consulting and OmnichannelX

Hear more from the experts

Content strategist and omnichannel pioneer Noz Urbina cohosted our February 2023 webinar How to get started with your utility's content strategy. Watch the recording to hear his insights on adaptive content and its enabling technologies.

This webinar is available to members of the E Source Corporate Communications Service. Interested in a membership? Contact us to learn more.

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1. Start somewhere

Content strategy isn't a project. It's a discipline—a holistic way of thinking about, creating, delivering, and managing content. And it's never-ending. Urbina likens it to laundry, saying, "You can be more or less on top of it, but it's never done."

In a video interview, Kyllo explained the basics of content strategy and gave advice on how to get started (**figure 1**).

Figure 1: What is content strategy?

Kyllo advised that you start your content strategy journey by addressing the one thing that's most important to you. For example, maybe you need to fine-tune your voice and tone. Maybe you need to archive outdated web pages. Once you've matured in that area of content strategy, you can move on to others.

We suggest you examine your current content processes and output, identify the points of failure or success, and start your strategy there. It doesn't matter whether you start by fixing a weakness or building on a strength. Just start somewhere.

Start where you're weak

Maybe you don't have a plan for unpublishing outdated web pages. Maybe your content quality is low. Or maybe you're not ranking in Google search results because your keywords are wrong or your website is too slow. Focus on one of these deficiencies, and make fixing it your first goal.

Start where you're strong

Maybe your customer research is recent, reliable, and relevant. Maybe your content management protocol is standardized and well enforced. Or maybe your content creators are skilled, efficient, and prolific. Fortify one of these strengths into a pillar of your content strategy.

2. Collect input from customers and internal stakeholders

Learn about your customers' needs, expectations, interests, and pain points by interviewing, surveying, and gathering user experience data from them. Understand how they view your brand and how they interact with your content.

You need to consider how internal staff will be affected by changes to your enterprise-wide content processes. Be sure to talk to reps from:

- Business strategy
- Customer experience
- IT
- Leadership
- Legal
- Marketing

Ask your stakeholders questions such as:

- How would a content strategy project affect your role and team?
- What kind of content do you typically publish?
- Who are you trying to reach with that content?
- What do you want your readers to do after seeing your content?
- How do you publish content? Do you have any processes or roles in place?
- What do you think a content strategy should accomplish for our utility as a whole? What should it accomplish for you and your team?
- How do you see your team working to create, publish, and maintain content in the future?

Then analyze the responses to your questions and create a matrix to capture your stakeholders':

- *Level of support for a content strategy project.* Are stakeholders aware of your content strategy project and how it will affect them? Do they support or oppose it?
- *Decision-making power related to the project.* Are they the person who would make decisions for the organization or their team related to your content strategy project?
- *Degree of impact from a content strategy project.* What are their areas of focus or interest in the project? Where does their work intersect with it?
- *Pain points and motivations related to the project.* What concerns them about the project? What motivates them? What goals or targets does your content strategy project potentially support or block?

3. Identify your brand, audience, and messaging

Using your stakeholder matrix, build a cross-functional team that includes:

- People who support your content strategy project and people who don't
- People who make final decisions and people who don't
- People who have various concerns and motivations related to your project

Assemble these employees in a series of workshops to clarify and describe your brand, identify your primary audience, and craft your primary messaging.

Clarify and describe your brand

Get your team together for a card-sorting exercise to identify terms that best describe your utility's brand. You can create your own deck of brand attributes or buy one off the shelf. Margot Bloomstein, content strategy expert and author of Content Strategy at Work, sells her BrandSort Cards to help organizations crystallize their brand identity.

Identify your primary audience

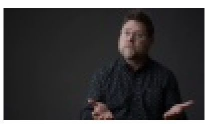
In another workshop with your team, discuss your primary audience.

Many organizations assume their primary audience is all their customers lumped together. But it's actually a subset of this group. It's all their customers who are engaging with their content. So your primary audience is constantly shifting, depending on what, when, where, why, and how you're communicating.

Kyllo warned, "You can't talk to everybody at the same time and in the same way." He suggested identifying audiences that are priorities for you and communicating with them in the channels they prefer (**figure 2**).

Figure 2: Are you really creating content for everyone?

Don't assume that your primary audience is "everyone." Kyllo advised delivering your content through the channel you know your primary audience is using.



We recommend using personas to identify your primary audience for content projects and campaigns. Creating personas will help you know how to target readers by channel and deliver content to them where they are.

Learn more about developing personas in our Ask E Source answer [What are best practices for developing customer personas?]

Craft your primary messaging

Think about what message you want your content to convey to your customers and how they'll view your company as a result. To compose your primary messaging, work with your content strategy team to brainstorm:

- The first impression you want to make on your customers
- The value you want customers to see in your company
- The customer actions that prove you're providing that value

For example, your desired first impression might be: "Our utility is a trusted energy partner." The value customers see in you might be: "My utility is the place I go for reliable energy-related information." And your customers might prove your value by signing up for outage alerts, participating in a demand response program, or trusting you enough to not call your contact center about a high bill.

Write your content strategy statement

Your content strategy statement will guide how you create, deliver, and manage your content. Write one or two sentences that summarize your approach to developing and distributing content.

You can follow the Mad Libs exercise developed by Brain Traffic consultant and author Meghan Casey. We describe it in our blog post Your prescription for content strategy.

An example of a utility's content strategy statement might be:

> Our content provides timely, relevant, informative, and entertaining content that helps us connect with customers and reinforce our brand so they'll trust us and view us as energy partners.

4. Build a content team

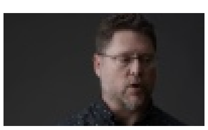
Your cross-functional content strategy team helped you describe your brand, find your primary audience, and develop your primary messaging. Now you need a team to help you create and manage the content that embodies those characteristics.

Find the right team members

Staff your core content team with copywriters, editors, designers, and project managers. Then augment your team with other roles, depending on the project. This can include subject matter experts, marketers, or web developers. Kyllo described how this cross-functional model can help you create and distribute content as efficiently as possible (**figure 3**).

Figure 3: Advice on how to assemble a content team

Content roles can vary by project. Kyllo explained how employees from different departments can play separate roles in your content projects. This cross-functional participation can ensure the accuracy, quality, and efficiency of content.



Request and mine content

Create a culture that allows employees to bring stories to your content team.

Without input from other teams, you run the risk of creating content that duplicates, contradicts, or competes with existing material. Siloed within your team, you can end up writing for yourself, without connecting the content to a customer need or business goal. Or you can make assumptions that are misleading or inaccurate.

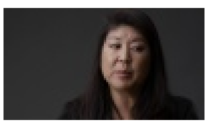
Set up a content ideas portal. Ask employees to submit their content ideas via your company intranet, content-planning system, or dedicated email address. Regularly review these submissions and close the loop on each to show that you value employees' ideas and want them to continue bringing them to you.

Identify news sources on other teams. Encourage your team members to establish relationships with employees across all departments so they can tap them for content ideas. Use these contacts to keep up to date on projects across the organization.

Aoyagi-Stom presented at E Source Forum 2018 and talked to us about how her team at SCE works across departments to find and feature good stories (**figure 4**).

Figure 4: SCE gets story ideas by connecting with other teams

Aoyagi-Stom warned that the larger your organization becomes, the more important it is to get different departments working together on content. She told us she encourages her content team at SCE to talk to utility employees in other departments. "The stories are there," she said. "You just have to mine them."



Pull ideas from customer interactions. Unearth content ideas from customers' responses to your social media posts, feedback they've given contact center agents, or conversations they've had with lineworkers or other frontline staff.

Your contact center is a great source of voice-of-the-customer (VOC) data. Our report How mature is VOC in the utility sector? identifies 46 activities utilities typically perform to collect and act on customer feedback.

Plan content projects

Meet with your team to review story ideas, prioritize content, assign responsibilities, and schedule projects.

Score your content ideas. To determine which projects to move forward, plot your content ideas on a grid along two axes: customer need and business impact.

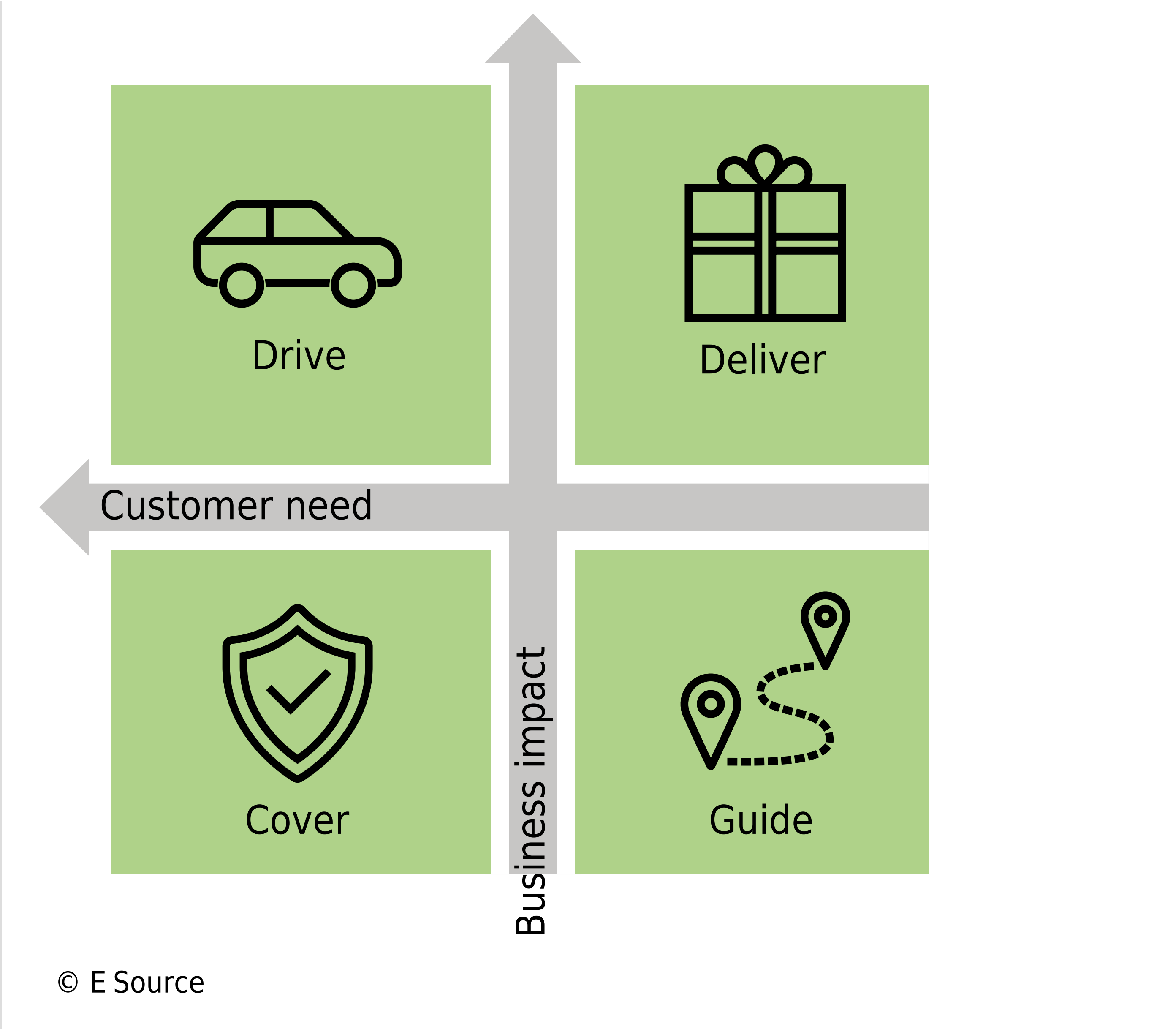
Consider the extent to which your content is meeting a customer need or desire or having a beneficial impact on your business. Content that does both equally well should get the highest priority. Content that does neither should get the lowest priority.

As shown in **figure 5**, you'll end up with content plotted in one of four quadrants, which correspond with the general purposes of business content:

- *Deliver core products and services.* This content gives customers the products or services they expect from you and that you promised to give them. For utilities, an example of this is billing and payment information.
- *Drive desired actions.* This content pushes customers to take actions that benefit your business. An example of this is utility program enrollment forms.
- *Cover your bases.* This is content you keep around because it might protect the business or solve a fringe customer problem. Examples of this are utility annual reports and meeting minutes from commission hearings.
- *Guide customer journeys.* This is content customers want or need but that doesn't have a high business impact. An example of this is outage maps.

Figure 5: Content prioritization quadrant

When prioritizing your content, assess how well it meets your customers' needs and how much it benefits your business. You'll find content that delivers your core products and services is the most valuable, while content that covers your bases is the least valuable. Content that drives customers to take actions that benefit your business and content that guides customers through online experiences with you is moderately valuable.



Schedule projects. After you prioritize your content, you should schedule and assign resources to your projects.

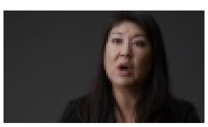
We suggest using a content marketing platform or content-planning tool such as Contently, CoSchedule, DivvyHQ, GatherContent, or Kapost. These products can manage your content assets, track projects, create schedules, send notifications, facilitate team collaboration, and analyze content performance.

At the very least, you need an editorial calendar. Having one will help you keep track of the deadlines, milestones, events, holidays, and budget cycles that affect you and your customers.

At SCE, Aoyagi-Stom's team uses multiple tools to schedule and manage content (**figure 6**). According to Aoyagi-Stom, she plans content a year ahead, aligning and adjusting it to correspond with important events and national days such as National Lineman Appreciation Day, Earth Day, and Energy Efficiency Day.

Figure 6: Tools SCE uses to plan and manage content

SCE uses an editorial calendar, Microsoft Office SharePoint, Percolate enterprise content marketing software (now Seismic), and iPR Software digital asset management tools. Aoyagi-Stom recommended using tools to improve your content team's efficiency, but she also stressed the importance of relationships in the content management life cycle.



5. Write reusable and discoverable content

You want to establish a content strategy that supports component-based content creation. When you break down your content into flexible, reusable parts, you open the doors to these advanced content experiences:

- Personalization that targets individuals or segments
- Adaptive and progressive content you can customize for specific audiences or journey touchpoints
- Omnichannel content delivery on platforms such as mobile apps, interactive voice response systems, chatbots, and social media
- Knowledge management of data and information you can reassemble as content

Create and organize content components. Identify the types of content you use—for example, program descriptions, rate tables, eligibility requirements, and billing definitions.

Write these components in your standard company voice, classify them with metadata, and house them in your content management system database. Then work with your web developers on the back-end logic that tells your content management system how to build web pages with minimal human intervention.

Make your content findable. To make your content discoverable by public search engines like Google, as well as by your own on-site search tool:

- Include relevant keywords in your content
- Apply your taxonomies consistently
- Maintain lists of synonyms and misspellings to improve "Did you mean?" search engine–generated suggestions
- Review customers' search queries regularly and adjust your terminology if necessary

6. Measure content performance

The content performance metrics utilities use

Utilities most often track page views and completion rates for online activities, according to our report How customers use utility websites, which features data from the E Source 2021 Digital Metrics Survey.

If you want to use successful logins as a metric to gauge content performance, start by making it easy for customers to create an account. Get advice in our report Tips for simplifying My Account registration to increase enrollment.

These reports are available to members of the E Source Digital Self-Service subscription. Interested in a membership? Contact us to learn more.

You can use a host of metrics to gauge how well your content is performing, including:

- Page views to measure how many times users visit certain pages on your website
- Unique page views to measure how many discrete accounts visit certain pages on your site
- Session duration to measure the amount of time users are active on your site
- Time on page to measure the amount of time users are active on a page
- Page speed to measure how fast your website loads pages
- Bounce rate to measure the percentage of visitors who navigate away from your website after viewing only one page
- Exit rate to measure the percentage of page views of a certain page where that page was the last one viewed during a visit to your website
- Scroll depth to measure how far down on a page users scroll
- Completion rate for online activities to measure how many transactions users complete from start to finish on your website
- Successful logins to measure the percentage of attempted customer logins that were successfully completed

But depending on your goal for a specific piece of content, these measurements may not be enough to determine whether the content is doing what you want it to do.

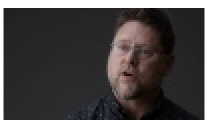
At SCE, Aoyagi-Stom said her team looks for upticks in customer satisfaction in brand resonance surveys such as those conducted by J.D. Power and the Marketing Science Institute.

She also suggested utilities widen their scope when they're looking to benchmark their content and look at what other industries are doing. Find who is actually doing content well. According to Aoyagi-Stom, "It could be anybody."

Kyllo said you can also judge content effectiveness by measuring how well and how efficiently a piece of content was created (**figure 7**). Was it written to be compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act usability standards? Can search engines find it? Is it easy to read? How many employee hours were spent writing, editing, designing, coding, promoting, and managing it?

Figure 7: Measure content performance and process performance to understand content effectiveness

Kyllo noted you can measure the ROI for content by looking at how long it took to publish a piece of content and how many errors that piece had, which can affect how well the content performs.



7. Govern your content

Websites with outdated or forgotten web pages directly and indirectly affect your bottom line. Operationally, bloated websites are expensive to host and maintain. They’re also frustrating to use, which means customers will avoid them as a way to communicate or transact with you.

To keep your website light and fast, remove unnecessary content, update essential content, and avoid adding digitally heavy content.

Set governance standards. Before you can govern your content, you need to establish rules for managing it. Make sure your content team knows:

- The criteria for judging whether content is unnecessary, outdated, redundant, or ineffective
- Who’s responsible for making archiving decisions
- How content type or audience affects governance decisions
- Who completes specific governance tasks

Maintain content inventories. Keep track of the elements on your website. Every 6 or 12 months, decide whether you’ll keep, update, or archive every asset. Move content flagged for update into your upcoming-projects queue. And unpublish content flagged for archive.

You can also do rolling inventories where you continually assess your content and make on-the-fly decisions to keep, update, or archive it.

If you adopt a component-based content creation approach, your governance burden is much lighter. In our February 2023 webinar, Urbina explained:

> When you standardize the types of content you use to create deliverables, you can govern the parts rather than the whole. Content types like company descriptions and staff bios aren’t going to change much. You can review those twice a year or maybe annually. But utility program descriptions [are content types] you might have to review very frequently because they change.

And with a component-based approach, edits you make to one component will appear everywhere you use that component. You don’t have to track down each instance and update it manually.

Clean up your code. Old JavaScript, CSS (Cascading Style Sheets), tracking codes, and third-party plug-ins can weigh down your website and affect its performance. Periodically sweep your site to find and remove this legacy code.

Reduce your digital footprint. Make it your policy to unpublish an old piece of content every time you publish a new one.

In 2019, digital experience designer Gerry McGovern found that:

> 90% of data is never accessed again 90 days after it is first stored. 80% of downloaded apps are never used again after 90 days. 90% of data has been created in the last two years. Over the years, we found that we had to delete 90% of a typical website to make it useful.

To reduce your digital footprint:

- Avoid adding content to your website that no one asked for and no one will read
- Limit the number of images on your website, and avoid using decorative images that don’t add value
- Design your web pages around your customers’ top tasks, so they can quickly accomplish what they set out to do and then end their session on your website
- Make your content easy to find so customers don’t waste energy searching and browsing

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