

SPEAK WITH ONE VOICE

How to Gain Competitive Advantage in the Content Era



acrolinx

FOREWORD

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In case you hadn't noticed, in today's online world we are practically drowning in content — more content, in fact, than we could ever begin to consume. The problem is that most of it's going to waste. Why? Because it's not very good and, as a result, people are tuning it out.

In *Speak with One Voice: How to Gain Competitive Advantage in the Content Era*, Acrolinx describes the new content-driven world that we live in and its implications for businesses like yours. It captures what makes for great content, providing valuable tips and suggestions for how you can create it in your organization using the right tools.

The bottom line is that it's not enough just to create content any more. Your content has to be great — or you're losing an opportunity to help your business. And, since great content starts with great writing, I encourage you to read on for some useful advice about how to sharpen yours.

SCOTT ABEL
The Content Wrangler



A close-up, low-angle shot of a person's hands typing on a silver laptop keyboard. The person is wearing a brown sweater. The scene is bathed in a warm, golden light, likely from a window, creating a soft, hazy atmosphere. The background is blurred, showing a green plant and a wooden surface.

CHAPTER 1

Why Content Matters, Now More than Ever

The days when prospects had no choice but to call you to ask for product information are long gone.



Today's consumers go online to find what they want. And, if they can't easily track down the information they are looking for, they simply go somewhere else.

In fact, according to Forrester Research, prospects often don't contact sales organizations until they're between more than 60 percent to 90 percent of the way through the buying process.¹ That makes content the primary way prospects interact with your company for most of the buying process, and a critical precursor to closing deals.

And it's not just marketing content that buyers want. An increasing number of them also want to see technical documentation *before* they buy. In fact, according to Aaron Fulkerson, the Co-Founder and CEO of MindTouch, documentation "is actually feeding top-of-the-funnel activity... Some companies are reporting that documentation is bringing in over 50 percent of their qualified leads."²

After the sale, customers also prefer to keep personal contact to a minimum: 72 percent of respondents to a Forrester survey³ indicated that they would rather find help on their own, without being forced to call a help line. However, to deliver a satisfying self-service experience, your customers must be able to find, read, and understand your support information.

¹ [Buyer Behavior Helps B2B Marketers Guide the Buyer's Journey](#), Lori Wizdo, Forrester Research, October 4, 2012.

² [The Evolution of User Manuals](#), Aaron Fulkerson, *Forbes*, August 9, 2010.

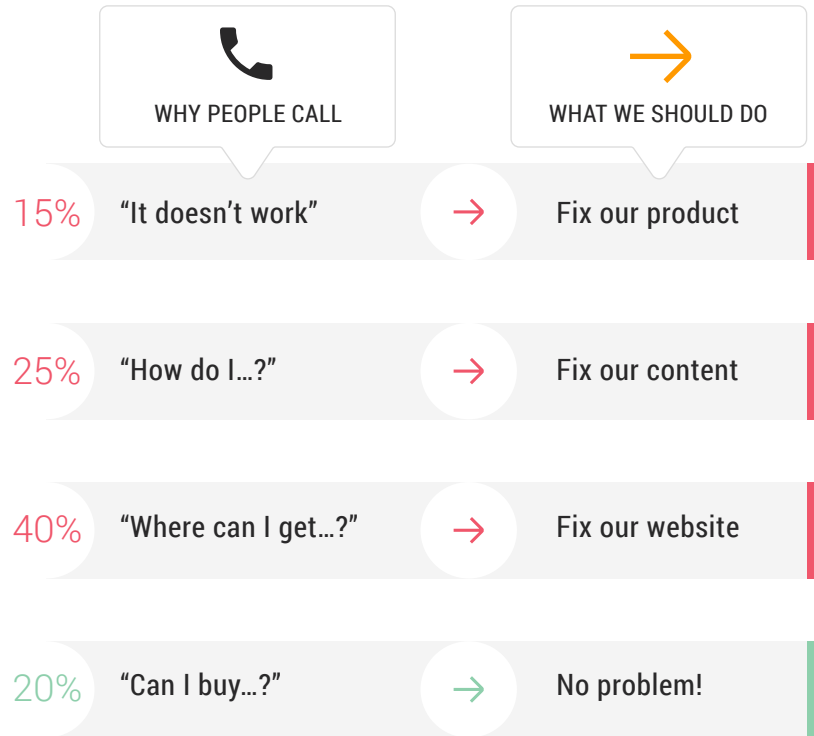
³ [Do Your Customers Want to Telephone You for Service?](#) Diane Clarkson, Forrester Research, April 6, 2010

The Best Service is No Service

As Amazon's Global VP of Customer Service, Bill Price knows better than most the impact of content on the entire customer experience. One of his key insights is that lower customer support calls are associated not only with lower support costs, but also with increasing customer satisfaction.

While examining the reasons why people called for service, he discovered that a lot of Amazon's service problems arose from either a lack of information or a lack of correct information.

In fact, two-thirds of Amazon's support calls arise because customers cannot find the content they're looking for or can't understand what they've found. Making small improvements in the findability, clarity, and completeness of Amazon's content reduces costs and increases customer satisfaction.



Tons of Content Spells Stiff Competition

Ever wonder how much content is being created every day? Here are just a few examples to illustrate the vast amounts of content that's being published, and competing for people's attention, each day:



2 million
blog posts



1 million
tweets



294 billion
e-mails



100,000
new domains



70,000
hours of YouTube videos



5 million
photos on Instagram

As a result of the shift to online, content has largely displaced personal interactions as a way to build relationships. All content, regardless of whether it comes from marketing, technical documentation, support, or any other department, has evolved into a powerful tool for attracting, retaining, and engaging customers.

Because of the vast quantity of content available and its critical importance to satisfying customers, we have now entered:

The content era: a time when companies' success or failure increasingly hinges on the quality of their content.

The good news is that the content era presents a huge opportunity. The bad news is that everyone is coming to the same realization. As a result, there's intense competition to create the high-quality, engaging content that's necessary to cut through the noise and capture your audience's attention.

With nearly limitless amounts of content competing for our attention, we have all learned to tune out anything that's promotional, irrelevant, low quality, or otherwise not worth our time. Eye-tracking studies underscore this point by proving that people almost never even *glance* at banner ads online, let alone click them.⁴

⁴ [8 Powerful Takeaways from Eye Tracking Studies](#), Neil Patel, April 16, 2014.

And with an average attention span of only eight seconds for viewing a web page, it's clear that people make quick decisions about what they will and won't read.⁵

Ironically, in the business world, companies have started to fight the content deluge by producing even more content. In the last few years, marketers have been stampeding toward content marketing, which focuses on delivering useful, enjoyable content that people actually want. Although content marketing has been around for over a century (for example, John Deere started publishing its quarterly magazine *The Furrow* to farmers in 1895), content has never been as important or as popular as it is today.

In fact, we're only at the beginning of the deluge of content that will come from content marketing programs. Few companies think they do enough content marketing, so they're ramping up quickly. But how can they make their content stand out amid all the competition? And how should companies align their marketing and technical content so that they speak with one voice to their prospects and customers?

In this eBook, we will answer these questions, share best practice for creating great content, and point you to technology that can help streamline the process and make it much more efficient.

⁵ [Attention Span Statistics](#), quoting research from the National Center for Biotechnology Information, U.S. National Library of Medicine, and The Associated Press.

” *Content marketing is not just about marketing content. Some of your best content may be right underneath your nose — especially technical content, which has the reputation for utility and objectivity that content marketers should crave.*



JOE PULIZZI

Founder & Executive Director,
Content Marketing Institute



CHAPTER 2

What Makes Content Great?

How often do you visit a website and find content that's poorly written? Maybe it's too wordy or contains too much jargon. Or maybe it just doesn't make sense. And when you find poor content, how long do you stick around?

All too often, words obscure messages instead of illuminating them. And, unfortunately, when that happens, content can frequently do more harm than good by confusing people or frustrating them. These days, however, it's not enough to fix language problems and make your content acceptable. Your content has to go well beyond *acceptable*; your content must be *exceptional*, so that it not only stands out from everyone else's content but also successfully captures your audience's attention.

How do you do that? By making sure that your content is readable, engaging, and consistent. In the process, you also want to ensure that it's easy to find and, if you need to create content in different languages (which companies increasingly do), that it's translatable.

In the following pages, we will take a closer look at each of these aspects of creating great content.



READABLE



ENGAGING



CONSISTENT



FINDABLE



TRANSLATABLE

Your words are your emissaries; they tell your customers who you are. In our content-driven world, writing matters more now — not less. That means that we all need to place a new value on an often-overlooked skill in content marketing: how to write, and how to tell a true story really, really well.



ANN HANDLEY

co-author of *Content Rules* and author of *Everybody Writes: Your Go-To Guide to Creating Ridiculously Good Content* (fall 2014, Wiley)



Readability: The Foundation of Great Content

When you create content, nothing is more important than making it easy to understand, which mainly depends on whether the content is readable. The readability of a piece of content is shaped by many factors, including:

- **Jargon**
Do your readers understand the words you use? Or do you confuse them with unfamiliar jargon?
- **Terminology**
Have you used the correct terms consistently and in the right way?
- **Spelling and grammar**
What percentage of your content contains relatively simple errors that distract, confuse, or mislead your readers?
- **Sentence structure**
Do all of your sentences express an idea clearly and directly? Are any so long that they're difficult to follow? Are any too convoluted to understand? Do they include superfluous words that add nothing but confusion?

In an ideal situation, writers create content and editors check it for readability, advising the writers on how to improve. But with budgets under constant pressure, many editors' jobs have disappeared, leaving the remaining editors stretched beyond their capacity.

As a result, content increasingly goes directly from a writer (or even worse, a subject matter expert who isn't a writer) to publishing, with no review at all.

People have so much content available to them that they must decide instantly if they want to read yours. You can't risk losing them with content that's difficult to read.

To learn more about how to improve the readability of your content, see the sidebar on **page 12**.



How to Improve Readability

Below are some tips to help you improve the readability of your content by focusing on your words and sentences:

WORDS

- **Use short words.** Don't say "acknowledge" if "admit" will do. See [Garbl's Writing Center](#) for more examples.
- **Use simpler phrases.** Why say "despite the fact that," if you can say "although" instead? Check out [University of Victoria's](#) website for a list of wordy phrases (and alternatives).
- **Eliminate words that weaken your text.** Delete words such as "sort of," "really," "frankly," "honestly," and "actually." Venture Galleries published a [useful list](#).
- **Avoid jargon.** Don't use acronyms (unless they're necessary) or insider language.
- **Use terminology consistently.** If you must use terminology, then don't be creative with it. Always use the same word to refer to the same thing to avoid confusion. For example, some readers may assume that "module," "component," and "part" each refers to a different thing even though that may not be your intention.

SENTENCES

- **Use short sentences.** The shorter, the better.
- **Use simple sentences.** Limit your sentences to one idea by using a subject-verb-object construction so that you're not interrupting yourself. For example, "The man could not stop dusting" is preferable to "The man, because of his obsessive neatness, could not stop dusting."
- **Use active voice instead of passive voice.** For example, "The dress was hemmed by the seamstress" would be easier to understand if you said, "The seamstress hemmed the dress." Passive voice sometimes hides the subject entirely, which may be appropriate if "the door was left open," but can be confusing if "the tool should be twisted."

For more advice, consider [Everybody Writes](#), a new book about writing for a content-driven world.

Going Beyond Readability with Engaging Content

To build relationships with your customers, your content doesn't just have to be readable, it also has to create the emotional connection with your audience necessary to foster engagement.

Poor readability makes your content less engaging, but other factors play a part too, including:

- **Personal pronouns**
Do you speak to your audience directly, by using "you" and "yours?" Or do you speak about them, with terms like "customers" or "users?"
- **Conciseness and liveliness**
Do you write in short, punchy sentences and paragraphs? Or does your content drone on endlessly?
- **Scanability**
Can your audience easily pick out the important points in your content by looking at headlines, captions, images, and lists? Or do they confront "walls of text" that they are less likely to read?



So how do you create engaging content?

1

Your Story

You need to have an interesting or useful story to tell.

2

Your Language

You have to tell that story in a way that your audience finds compelling.



The Nielsen-Norman Group, an expert in user experience, conducted a fascinating study of the impact of improving various aspects of language.¹ They found that conciseness had the greatest impact on usability and satisfaction, followed by scanability and objectivity. Combining improvements in all three areas more than doubled the impact of content compared to the original language.

¹ [Concise, SCANNABLE, and Objective: How to Write for the Web](#), John Morkes and Jakob Nielsen, January, 1997

How to Improve Engagement

Below are some tips for how you can make your content more engaging:

- Use personal pronouns so that you are speaking to your audience using “you” and referring to yourself as “we.” Some companies go so far as to forbid using the company’s name unless it eliminates confusion (or is legally required).
- Incorporate social sharing tools so people can easily share your content.
- Ask questions to encourage comments.
- Use polls and surveys to encourage your audience to interact with your content.
- Make it scannable by using short paragraphs, subheads, and bulleted lists that break up your text; you should make it easier for people who are just skimming to figure out if they want to start reading.



The Reader's Lament

Which tone of voice best speaks for the company? Is it the pompous, jargon-filled voice I see in one piece of content or the warm, concise voice I see in another?

Am I looking at two different words that mean the same thing? Or do these two different terms refer to different things?



Avoid Confusion and Reinforce Your Brand with Consistent Content

Because content comes from many sources both inside and outside the organization, inconsistencies are inevitable. Inconsistencies confuse readers.

Audiences that are confused can deal with their confusion in several ways: they can contact the company, guess the right answer, guess the wrong answer (with consequences ranging from mild to serious), or they can just move along to another vendor.

Inconsistencies can also affect your company's brand recognition. Rising above the noise of a crowded marketplace is difficult, but if your company name, product names, or key messages appear inconsistently, then rising above the noise becomes impossible. If you are in a competitive market — and who isn't? — making your content work harder for you can be a critical success factor.

How to Improve Consistency

To help guide your writers to make your content more consistent, you should prepare these reference tools:

TERMINOLOGY LIST

Use a spreadsheet or terminology management system to catalog each of the product names, brand names, and other technical or business terms that your organization uses in a specific way. For each term, include related information such as:

- **Status:** Whether the term is preferred, prohibited, acceptable, pending approval, or some other status that's specific to your business
- **Context:** Examples of the term in use
- **Variations:** Permissible forms of the term
- **Related terms:** Synonyms, preferred or prohibited alternatives, or translations of the term into other languages
- **Domains:** A specific area within an organization to which the term applies (may be relevant for large organizations with multiple products)

STYLE GUIDE

Style guides list your organization's writing rules. They typically cover all aspects of language that this eBook describes. You can create your own style guide from scratch, but you may find it easier to start with a commercially available style guide such as one of these:

- The Associated Press Stylebook
- The Chicago Manual of Style
- The IBM Style Guide: Conventions for Writers and Editors
- Microsoft Manual of Style
- The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage

Findability Matters Because Great Content Needs to Be Seen

Whether you're publishing support content on a dedicated portal, or making marketing content available on your website, you want your most relevant content to appear at the top of people's search results.

Despite increasing investment in search engine optimization (SEO), one study shows that web searches still fail to satisfy users 30 percent of the time.¹ Considering the vital role of search engines in the distribution of content, it's important to optimize content so that it ranks high in relevant searches.

While there are SEO "tricks" that you can try to boost your search rankings, the most important thing you can do is to focus on creating high-quality content that includes appropriate keywords in appropriate places. Doing so can increase the number of people who click through to your pages by two to three times.²

Unfortunately, many companies don't optimize for findability. Those that do optimize tend to focus their efforts on the small number of web pages that directly drive revenue because they can't afford to optimize the rest of their pages. Without the right tools, SEO optimization can be an expensive and labor-intensive process.

However, any content that's worth writing should be worth finding. The key is to find ways to optimize every page while keeping your costs low. See the sidebar on **page 19** for tips on how you can optimize your content.

¹ [2006 User Update-How Information Providers Can Keep Pace with User Demands for Time-Saving Solutions](#), Outsell, May 25, 2006.

² Data comes from Acrolinx's experience with customers who conducted experiments and carefully measured their results.

Findability: What You Should Know

Improving the findability of your content can increase your revenue by making it easier for consumers to get their hands on your product information. It can also decrease support costs and improve customer satisfaction by making the technical information your customers need available so that they don't have to contact your support desk.

So how do you improve your content's findability? Keep these pointers in mind:

- Create high-quality content that's unique, substantial, and well-written.
- Include keywords that match what customers are looking for; for help, you can use a tool such as Google's [Keyword Planner](#) to find out which terms are most popular; remember that your customers may use a different language than you do.
- Make sure that you include keywords in prominent locations on your page, such as the title, headings, and meta description.
- Don't overdo your keyword placement; write naturally.
- Don't compete with yourself; ideally, you should optimize only one of your web pages for each keyword you are targeting.

While other factors matter too, such as links from other high-quality pages to yours, the factors listed above are the easiest for you to control.

To find out more about SEO, check out these great resources:

- [The Beginners Guide to SEO](#)
- [Search Engine Land](#)
- [Search Engine Journal](#)

To market into new regions successfully, you must speak to them in their language. It's just as important to connect to your 'foreign' language audiences as your native language audiences.



LORI THICKE

Founder of Lexcelera, and Founder of
Translators Without Borders

” Translatability: Sharing Your Content with the World

Many emerging markets, such as India and China, have driven huge increases in global trade over the last decade. As these countries develop, they create opportunities for growth far beyond what's possible in nations with mature economies.

To satisfy consumers in these new markets, companies must localize their content into more languages. As the time and cost of developing content for each local market grows, there's increasing pressure to find faster, cheaper ways to localize.

The most important impact on localization costs is the quality of the source content. Content that's difficult to understand leads to problems with both human translators and machine translation (MT). To find out how you can improve the translatability of your content, see the sidebar on **page 21**.

“The style of the source language has significant impact on the quality of the translation and how well the translated content can be understood.”

— From the Microsoft Manual of Style (4th Edition).¹

Great content starts with information that your audience will find relevant, interesting, and perhaps even entertaining. But that’s just the starting point. As we’ve described in this chapter, your language also matters: you want people to be able to find, read, and understand your content.

The next chapter describes how most organizations set up their standards for content, the difficulties they face in enforcing those standards, and how content optimization software can help.

¹ Reviews and purchase information about the book are available from [Amazon](#). More information about authoring for machine translation is on a [Microsoft blog](#).

How to Improve Translatability

Most of the lessons earlier about improving readability apply to translatability as well:

- Although it’s possible to oversimplify when writing for translatability, you should use short and simple words and sentences.
- Make sure that your terminology is used consistently.

Technical writer and editor John Kohl has written one of the best books on this subject: *The Global English Style Guide: Writing Clear, Translatable Documentation for a Global Market*. He’s also written a free online article (PDF).

Here are some other tips on improving translatability:

1. Keep phrasal verbs together. “Turn the power switch off” should be “turn off the power switch.”
2. Don’t omit “that.” “Remove the screw under the lid” should be “remove the screw that is under the lid.”



CHAPTER 3

Getting the Tools You Need to Create Great Content

Public-facing content comes from almost every part of your organization. Marketing often takes the lead, but plenty of content also comes from R&D, service/support, and sales. With all of those voices, how can you hope to produce content that's readable, engaging, consistent, findable, and translatable?

One solution is to establish standards in the form of a style guide and a terminology spreadsheet, which includes brand names as well as technical terms. Most companies have developed such standards, but there are many drawbacks:

Information overload

Terminology spreadsheets and style guides often contain more information than a typical person can remember. For example, Microsoft publishes a wonderful style guide (Microsoft Manual of Style for Technical Publications), but it's 432 pages long! Similarly, many companies manage thousands of terms in their spreadsheets.

Difficult to enforce

Fewer and fewer organizations can afford to employ editors to proofread all of their content. Even in organizations that still have editors, it is still possible to miss problems or misapply standards.

Lack of enterprise standards

In most cases, style guides are created and enforced within a department, such as technical documentation or marketing, and not across the entire organization. No search optimization // For the vast majority of content that companies produce, optimizing for findability is too time-consuming.

Not measured

Without measurements of document quality, readability, or tone of voice, it's impossible to know if a document meets any standards at all.

To combat these drawbacks, companies have started turning to content optimization software as the following section describes.

How Content Optimization Software Supports Great Content

Software platforms for optimizing content have been available for about a decade. This software not only checks spelling and grammar, but also terminology (including technical terms and brand names), style, tone of voice, and keywords (for search).

Specifically, content optimization software should:

1. Let companies create and manage corporate standards for tone of voice, style, terminology, SEO keywords, and other guidelines.
2. Work within content creation tools to check content against corporate standards and guide writers to make improvements.
3. Produce analytics that track performance and show where there's room for improvement.

Writers use content optimization software just as they use spelling and grammar checking tools. The software works within content authoring tools such

as word processors, desktop publishing software, XML editors, and web-based editors.

When content is ready for checking, the writer clicks a button and can step through the errors. Underlying the most sophisticated content optimization software products are linguistic engines that analyze word usage and sentence structure. They detect content problems such as:

- Tone of voice such as how to address your customers and avoid jargon
- Style violations such as passive voice and use of pronouns
- Technical terminology problems
- Branding violations
- Safety or compliance issues arising from misleading or obsolete terminology
- Keyword usage to ensure that your content can be found
- Overused, underused, and misused keywords
- Spelling and grammatical errors

- Overly long or complicated sentences
- Issues that will make translation more difficult and expensive

One of the advantages of using content optimization software that's based on a linguistic analysis engine is that it minimizes false alarms. From our work with customers, for example, we have noticed that user frustration quickly increases if more than 5 percent of the errors that the system detects are not really errors, and frustrated users will avoid using the software entirely.

Content optimization software has many other benefits too, including substantial cost savings that arise from the internal efficiencies it creates as well as increases in revenue that result from improvements in customer satisfaction. To find out more about the benefits of using content optimization software, [click here](#).

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We are in an economy of experiences — delivered through content. But in order to differentiate and rise above the noise that competes for our audience's attention, every single aspect of that experience must be optimized. It is the content strategist's mission to ensure that every touchpoint that a customer will have with the brand's content experience is optimal — from the relevance it has, to the consistency of the message, the accuracy of the information, the language it's in — and ultimately the influence it has.



ROBERT ROSE

Chief Strategist at Content Marketing Institute;
Contributor Senior Analyst at Digital Clarity Group

End Note

In the content era, content has become the currency of commerce. To successfully attract and service your customers, you must deliver content that rises above the noise.

And to deliver great content, you must focus on more than just relevance and usefulness. You must also focus on the language itself, to make sure that your content is findable, readable, and engaging.

To guide your writers to follow your corporate standards for content, you need more than just style guides and terminology lists. You need content optimization software that lets you centrally manage your standards, guide writers to follow your standards, and produce reports on how well you're doing against your standards.

About Acrolinx

Acrolinx technology helps the world's best companies speak with one voice — with content that's more findable, readable, and engaging. Our content optimization capabilities help companies like Adobe, Dell, Cisco, IBM, Philips, and Siemens align, enhance, and enrich their marketing and technical information. Built on a powerful linguistic analytics engine, our technology helps our customers stand apart from their competitors by delivering content with greater warmth, readability, and conciseness.

Please visit our website at **www.acrolinx.com** for product information, e-mail us at **contact@acrolinx.com**.

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