ANATOMY OF A CONTENT OPTIMIZATION STRATEGY

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All too often content marketers forget that our work is not complete with the launching of content. Content is a valuable business asset that requires maintenance, grooming, and optimization over its entire life cycle, maximizing its return on investment (ROI). Content optimization—the process of improving content for users, search engines, and business results—is a key part of any successful content program as it extends the life and reach of your content.

As you read on, you will understand the five core areas of content optimization to prioritize and improve your digital strategy. These areas are: Performance, Governance, Channel and Device Optimization, Testing, and User Experience (UX).
The path to content optimization is often tricky to navigate. If you are not sharply focused on your optimization strategy, your content performance will suffer.

A holistic optimization approach fosters a consistent test-and-learn mentality, which allows providers of content experiences to be flexible; therefore, they can either quickly improve potential shortfalls or gain data-driven confidence that the strategies in place are the right ones. It is all about pursuing constant innovation and improving every touch point along the consumer journey.

This optimization philosophy stems from a culture of encouraged discovery and curiosity, with the goal of improving and increasing clients’ programs by extending the value of their content over time. Question your work constantly, and use tests to steer strategies before making major changes. One can categorize our practice of optimization into five core competencies: Performance, Governance, Channel and Device Optimization, User Experience, and Testing.
At Pace, we audit our content in regular intervals to measure engagement using composite scoring. Our performance optimization measures content effectiveness in order to stay at or above a program’s key performance indicators (KPIs). Just as important as creating a strong content experience is ensuring that the assets meet the demands set forth in the strategy. Provide a level of accountability by conducting data-driven analytics of assets, attributes, and program performance against pre-defined KPIs.

In order to achieve a high level of consistency, programs should begin with analytics and strategy teams obtaining brand and industry benchmarks as reference points. You must know where you are to plan for the future and set realistic expectations. Listed below are some KPI examples by audience type within a four-level, basic conversion funnel:

A SAMPLING OF KPIs ALONG THE CUSTOMER JOURNEY

KPIs should be adapted to the specific channel being used as goals for social content are going to be different from goals for ecommerce content.
EXAMPLE:
For a technology client, we monitored topics and identified one specific topic that had the most socially reached (56k visitors) piece of content on the ecommerce website. The page with the content encouraged 1,584 clients to download the client’s app in 14 days.

CONTENT STRATEGY: SERVING THE RIGHT CONTENT AT THE RIGHT TIME
Governance plans ensure that content remains effective and relevant to an audience over time. Each content project should have a governance plan agreed upon prior to execution of the project that includes business rules to inspect and refine material regularly. How you prioritize your governance tactics for content will be dependent on the rules set for it including content review cadence, governance stakeholders, “keep/kill/revise” criteria, revision workflows, and brand and editorial guidelines, as well as many other content standards. Following these established guidelines keeps all stakeholders aligned, ensures that assets continuously meet program goals, and protects accuracy, consistency, and audience relevancy.

It may seem repetitive to reflect upon brand and editorial guidelines in governance plans since they were already applied in content creation, but there are several reasons the task is valuable. Often, the people who created the content are not the ones tasked with governance reviews, so including brand and editorial guidelines gives them a “one-stop” resource to consult. The brand may change between the time of content creation and the time of review; thus, it should be revised to reflect current guidelines. Although revisions to content can be down in the details, it is also important to take a high-level view of the piece(s) to make sure it clearly expresses the brand’s voice and avoids causing confusion.

Content can be high and resource time may be limited to creating and circulating new content, so it is vital to adhere to governance plans. It is easy to get lost in the creativity of new content creation and to forget about existing content. Adherence to governance plans will prompt continual review of evergreen and older content to ensure its relevance and alignment with goals to maximize KPIs. It is also a great opportunity to go back and review existing content with an SEO state of mind for internal linking opportunities to increase the search equity of your pages.

Tools can be used to help with governance optimization tactics such as style guides, taxonomies, content workflows/calendars, archiving standards, and editorial guidelines based upon content type or publishing date.
Audience Validation

Content creation is a discipline best executed when it focuses on continuously becoming more relevant to the target audience. How do you initially identify that audience to meet their needs, and how can you evolve with them over time?

Consider first the range of different data that is available to you:
1. Quantitative measurement platform data like Adobe, Google Analytics, or channel measurement platforms
2. Qualitative data from surveys, ethnographies, or focus groups
3. Third-party research from professional research firms, such as Pew, Gallup, Nielsen, U.S. Census, etc.

After aggregating insights about your target audience and accounting for a mix of geographic, demographic, psychographic, technographic, and behavioral segmentation, an effective approach is to construct personas or profiles that you can use to craft your content themes from an editorial direction. Remember to respect that all individuals are often a mix of attributes within these personas, and it is best when your content program design can accommodate and adapt to the diverse content consumption preferences of your audience. Using content filters, examining search terminology, and incorporating a test-and-learn approach to content publishing will help you uncover new insights on a weekly or monthly basis.

Since your KPIs are based upon a mix of meeting the needs of your audience and your business goals, the engagement and conversion data from their interactions with your content will help you to refine your personas and your editorial approach to them consistently.

We recommend repeating this same exercise annually and analyzing the change from your original personas. We also recommend that you always adapt your UX design and KPIs to learn more about your audience when you sense there are gaps.
Content Quality

Content quality is always challenging to tackle. After all, quality can be in the eye of the beholder, right? Overall, it is about making sure you are creating engaging material specific to audiences and channels to drive maximum program results. Even so, there are several angles to consider.

In a very broad sense, you must evaluate the content against the brand guidelines and internal and external insights. These issues include taking industry into account, as well as people and creative trends, which may have changed since the content’s initial creation. Because many different sources—internally and externally—produce content, they must be held accountable on an equal standard to align with a brand holistically.

During content creation, review is essential to make sure it is useful, applicable, and relevant. Consider using a content quality checklist to make sure each piece meets your standards. The checklist may include questions such as:

- Is the content relevant to user needs, goals, and interests?
- Is the content accurate?
- Is the content engaging? Does it persuade viewers to take a desired action?
- Is the content easy to scan or read, including font size, colors, formatting, etc.?
- Do multimedia assets meet technical standards to ensure usability?

Overall, it is about making sure you are creating engaging material specific to audiences and channels to drive maximum program results.
If you ensure your standards up front, maintenance is simpler. During the governance phase, you can use an abbreviated quality checklist to ensure that your content remains high quality. Another aspect of content quality is customization for audiences and channels. If a created content asset targets Audience A, then during governance reviews, you should evaluate it to make sure it still meets Audience A’s ever-changing needs. It may require some revision to do so. If you want to expand the reach of an existing content campaign, you can draw from the original pieces as a starting point to create material specific to the channels serving the content. Content must be readable/viewable in and relevant to each channel in order for audiences to process it and respond accordingly. Optimization in this realm may range from image or the font size within images to the number of words in an article.

Lastly, content quality also includes reviewing material as a search engine would to ensure compliance with best practices as well as optimizing content for maximum organic visibility.
Optimizing for Search Engines
With more than 100 billion searches conducted on Google each month, or an average of 2.3 million searches per minute, search optimization is more important than ever. It ensures that content is always identifiable by targeted audiences, boosting engagement and providing a high level of ROI.

For organic search, it is key to focus on three core areas: enhancing content to appear in the search results; soliciting clicks; and following through with on-page engagement practices to make content authoritative and increase visibility with search engines. Also a good idea is to consider organic search optimization within social channels since more and more users begin their searches through YouTube, Facebook, etc. Having a consistent presence in these spaces is critical.

To manage tracking and the frequent search engine algorithmic updates, pair research and discovery with ongoing analysis and refinement of assets to optimize for organic and paid search-driven traffic.

Local SEO Optimization
Local search engine optimization is a sweeping change affecting all businesses big and small in the search engine results pages (SERPs). Whether you have multiple physical store locations or you are an ecommerce or content-based site, local SEO tactics remain a top search priority for Pace.

Google recently changed its algorithm to be locally focused, which means that users will view listings for a much smaller search radius. As the company continues to personalize search results to users by their prior search history and their physical locations, we can all take advantage of the increasing daily search numbers and drive relevant traffic to our sites.
Email Optimization
Email marketing is one of the best ways to transfer knowledge and nurture your audience. Not only is sending emails a great way to communicate, but it can also—and should—work as a channel for generating leads. However, before those leads happen, you first must persuade your audience to open your emails, which is where subject line testing occurs. Test various types of message and tone to solicit more opens. To further refine your email success rates, play with testing the time of day and day of the week you send your communications.

After your open rates improve, you can begin focusing on optimizing your layout and template designs to increase click through rate.

To further increase engagement, test different pieces of content and messaging by targeting your audiences with the pieces most relevant to them. Content testing should include the types of headline messaging, image utilization, and amount of text used within the email. Play with the types of calls to action (CTAs) you use whether they are the text within a button, the button color, and the placement of the callout above or below images or text boxes.

The use of personalization within an email increases relevancy and thus results. According to a MarketingSherpa study, 4 out of 10 email subscribers reported that they have marked emails as spam simply because they were irrelevant.

Social Search Optimization
Social optimization is equally multifaceted because it focuses on both channel and content performance to guarantee that the right content appears in the right place. It also allows for visibility within social networks’ search results since not all audiences look for information solely within the traditional search engines of Google, Bing, Yahoo, Ask, AOL, etc.
Facebook reported 45+ million small and medium businesses were actively using Facebook pages to target their audiences and expand their reach. With so much noise in the social space, remember the rule of three when focusing on paid search efforts: Use the right terms and audience selections to display ads; build the elements within ads to solicit clicks; and serve the right content displayed in the most effective way for audiences who visit the site. Everything must align to increase conversions, prove ROI, and stretch spends.

Optimizing by Device

Mobile search optimization is now a critical area of focus for brands big and small. As of May 2015, more Google searches take place on mobile devices than on computers in 10 countries including the United States and Japan.

Mobile visitors must have solid content experiences on their devices to ensure engagement and conversion. You must take into account your website’s design, content and navigational structure, page speed, and more to give users what they expect—a quality mobile experience. If your website is already well optimized for search engines, then making some additional elements and optimization tactics is all that is necessary to consider when optimizing for mobile. A website is only mobile-friendly when:

- Content looks good on a small screen/phone.
- One can easily navigate the site with a single finger.
- It does not require viewers to zoom or pinch the screen to see all content.
- It provides a service to a phone user (Ex: click-to-call buttons)
The first step of testing is to define goals clearly. After users view your content, how do you want them to engage, and what is the next step you want them to take to interact with your site? Whether you want them to view a video, provide their contact information for an email sign up feature, purchase products, view your service features, etc., you need to have this at the forefront of your mind to measure the success of your content. This goes beyond the basics of increased engagement and scroll rate. Remember, you can certainly have more than one objective for your content, but when you develop the individual pieces, make sure each one has a single, distinctive goal.

Conducting tests comprising all of the areas mentioned above will yield a data-driven strategy for constant improvement. To be successful, focus on clearly articulating your hypotheses to define exactly what needs to be tested, based upon data and qualitative assumption. Testing different content variables will ensure that you are producing the best material for the user and the business goals. The testing models Pace practices to evaluate content performance are A/B, multivariate, and qualitative and quantitative measurement and tracking.

Example A/B Testing Opportunities:
- Page layout
- Article length
- Number of visuals
- Offers
- Visual content consistency
- Content utilization
- Trust factors
- Number of form fields

Multivariate Testing Opportunities:
- Navigation
- Headline and page titles
- Text utilization
- Calls to Action (CTAs)
- Opt-in boxes
- Sense of urgency displays
Not only should the performance of the content itself be tested, but it is also important to review the placement of content within owned and paid channels to make sure you are serving the appropriate content to the right audiences at the most effective times. Below is an example of a Web-testing process we would follow:
There are generally two sources of testing ideas: business/strategic considerations made on theories and data-driven insights discovered through analytics. Once you compile all test ideas, prioritizing them is important to determine the cadence for testing. After approval of the flow, conduct tests using either global audience playgrounds, such as a homepage or landing page, or a more regional audience through email or social segmentation. After tests produce enough data for statistical significance, and opportunities are apparent, deploy updates, and report post-deployment to verify performance.

CASE STUDY EXAMPLE #1
- For one ecommerce retail brand, Pace worked with the client to design two layout variations for the homepage panel of their ecommerce website. The two designs underwent evaluation in a 50/50 A/B test, and over the week, the test was exposed to 7,600 visitors, providing statistically significant results.
- The variation increased the conversion rate by 3.4 percent for new visitors, and the increase provided a significant financial impact on sales.

CASE STUDY EXAMPLE #2
- Order checkout is a key area that should be optimized to determine what works best for a brand’s customer. For one client, Pace worked with the brand and tested a hypothesis that the location of the checkout box location was not leading to optimal performance.
- A test was planned with two other variations with slightly different layouts of the button.
- The new variations received a conversion rate of 55 percent–58 percent, a substantial increase from the conversion rates of the original layout, which was 43 percent.

CASE STUDY EXAMPLE #3
- For another ecommerce brand, a test was conducted to measure the impact of a video review of the product on the product description page. Pace was looking to measure a customer’s willingness to learn more about the product and efficacy of the video content.
- Four creative variations were created for the test. Over a period of four weeks, each version received about 700 visitors.
- Three of the four variations presented a higher conversion rate in comparison to the original page.
57 percent of customers say they will not recommend a business with a poorly designed mobile site, and 40 percent have turned to a competitor’s site after a bad experience. You cannot expect great content to drive conversion. You must consider the entire content experience, and that includes the look and feel of your websites and apps. Pace breaks down UX understanding and optimization into three parts: visual design, functionality, and site performance.

### User Experience (UX)

The evaluation of (UX) against brand guidelines and both internal and external insights ensures that the overall content experience is maximized and aligned with best practices, the industry, and creative trends. You must design easy-to-navigate content with a strong structure. Keeping matters simple will maintain audience engagement. The more time spent on a page, the more the search engines deem your content relevant. As a result, the strategy will boost your online visibility and provide maximum ROI.

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Quantitative and Qualitative UX

User experience is a broad category that focuses on both how audiences interact with the content and how it makes them feel. It falls into two practice areas: quantitative UX and qualitative UX.

Quantitative UX lets you determine the strength of content by defining KPIs, such as engagement, conversion, and share-ability. Look specifically at the numbers, and then make decisions based upon this data. Examples of quantitative UX KPIs for digital tasks include task-conversion rate, time on task, the use of internal site search or navigation, and user-error rates.

Qualitative UX reveals what content conveys emotions and feelings most effectively, which you can often discover through think tanks, live viewing, and consumer research. For a commercial or more traditional print ad, it is critical to understand the level of intent consumers have after experiencing the content to learn how it affects their opinions of a brand. While generally more difficult and time consuming to collect, some qualitative UX KPIs for digital tasks can be drawn from overall satisfaction ratings, think tanks, and reported performance or expectations.

Evaluating UX

Aside from quantitative and qualitative measurements, evaluating UX against brand guidelines and consumer insights ensures that the overall content experience is maximized for business needs and target audiences. It is also useful to compare an experience to best practices, industry, and creative trends. The content experience must be designed thoughtfully since it is vital to audience engagement. When users spend more time on a page, it increases search engine relevance. Higher relevance allows your content to increase its visibility online, thus providing a higher level of ROI.
Pace partners with brands to achieve set goals such as audience attraction, engagement, and conversion. This investment of both time and money should be accountable to ensure meeting goals and projected business outcomes. Optimization helps improve metrics by testing opportunities, and has sound ROI in terms of time, resources, and tool investments. It is both a creative and an analytical approach that can be scaled based on project and budget.

Optimization efforts are practical because they allow data-driven strategies to lead the way, rather than making major changes based upon assumptions. An always-testing mode allows you to evolve constantly and improve strategy, messaging, and communication with target markets.

"Optimization helps improve metrics by testing opportunities and has sound ROI in terms of time, resources, and tool investments."
NICOLE MARTIN  
*Director, Digital Strategy*

Nicole has extensive strategic planning experience with ecommerce and content-related websites involving both traditional and Web marketing, brand management, affiliate marketing, organic and paid search, social media, email marketing, CRMs and influencer programs. She works with Pace clients to maximize online visibility, plan and create efficiency for digital marketing strategies, and increase the volume of qualified visitors to content. Such work involves detailed site structural review and adjustments, user experience, conversion optimization testing, organic optimization, link building, and other various SEO practices. She also provides conversion metrics and ROI evaluations to fully understand the impacts of Pace’s content development and strategies. Prior to joining Pace, Nicole served in various marketing and analytics roles on both sides of the fence, with agencies and within large corporations.
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ABOUT PACE
Pace is North America’s leading independent content agency, specializing in multichannel branded content solutions that fuel loyalty, CRM, marketing, digital and social programs for many of the world’s largest brands. We have a staff of more than 330 professionals located in five offices across the United States–Greensboro, North Carolina; New York; Dallas; San Antonio; and Rogers, Arkansas. We help our clients navigate through the complex marketing landscape to develop programs that deliver targeted outcomes.