

Content management: web publishing needs real discipline

Gerry McGovern, www.gerrymcgovern.com

Too many organizations take an unprofessional approach to the content they publish on the Web. Many web managers still seem to believe that if they get the technology right the publishing will look after itself. Quality publishing requires skill and discipline. Unfortunately, discipline is something many web teams are lacking.

The Web has resulted in some very bad publishing habits. One of the worst is borrowed from software design: publish it fast and fix the mistakes later. This is a point that Paul Nattress, content editor of npower.com, makes in an email he recently sent me.

"Just because the web is a medium where we can update at will (as opposed to print where changes involve a complete print and distribution run) it doesn't mean that we should be sloppy about the work we publish," Paul writes. "Like print, we should get it right first time."

There is a lack of discipline in many web publishing processes because managers in charge of websites often don't respect content. As well, many people tasked with creating content don't have the skill or motivation to do a quality job.

"It strikes me that those who supply content to web teams don't take the content seriously," Paul Nattress continues. This belief is echoed by Lee Sullivan, a web content editor in Silicon Valley. "It's not that most corporate managers aren't trained in editorial skills—it's that they don't respect the concept to begin with," Lee states.

Lee writes about his experience of print publishing. "No editor in the world would dream of publishing a story that hadn't passed a first edit, a top edit, a copy edit, fact checking, photo editing, layout, and proofreading. Yet these corporate managers frequently expect to put content on the Web without any oversight at all."

Planning. A very unfashionable word. A very necessary activity if you want to become a professional publisher. A web team that doesn't plan deserves and gets little respect. People throw content at them, invariably at the last minute.

Nothing arrives on time because there is no concept of on time. There's always

some panic. Always something that must be published now. Always something that must be changed now.

Good web teams plan ahead. They have editorial meetings that are taken seriously. They have editors who establish commissioning processes. A calendar of events is put in place, charting what content needs to be published over a specified period.

Deadlines are deadlines. If you don't get your content in on time, it doesn't get published. If the writer ignored the style guide, it gets immediately returned. Editors have the authority to resist the latest crisis request to get stuff up. Hard lessons begin to get learned. Respect grows. Quality content begins to get published on time.

Intranets. It's only staff. That's the attitude I see a lot. Publish any old rubbish, once you get it up as quickly and cheaply as possible. Quality content makes staff more productive. Rubbish content wastes their time. Many organizations would be better off shutting their entire intranets down.

Discipline. Content is a business driver. Quality content drives profits and builds the brand. Poor quality content hurts profit and damages the brand. If web managers can't understand these basic concepts, they should be moved to a job they can do professionally.