

Content is King – The Internet will make every Company a Publisher!

Gerry McGovern interviewed by Artur P. Schmidt

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APS: To start with my first question. We are talking about content today. How does content relate to information and knowledge?

GMG: Knowledge in a larger definition is what an organisation knows. Knowledge is the useful stuff that's inside our heads. It's our ideas, our experience; it's what we know about how things work, about how to make things better. We read content so as to gain knowledge. Information is the communication of knowledge. Information is a process, an activity. Information can be communicated in two ways. The first is informally, verbally. The second way is to formally communicate information through content. Content is how we formally structure our knowledge. The Web is a giant container for content! It has become the ultimate place we go to get content. Today, information has become like milk. You need to distribute it quickly or it becomes worthless. Because we create more and more content today, we need content management systems. We don't live in a world of document management, of storage anymore, but in a publishing world that thinks of the content.

APS: But the publishing world is a navigation world. So do we need better navigation systems for content?

GMG: Yes, you need to get to the content quickly. The right content has to be brought to the right person at the right time, with the right cost. To do this we need excellent navigation and search systems. There is a lot of work to be done on this in most organizations. The broader discipline here is information architecture design. This includes metadata classification, navigation, search and layout. But navigation is definitely a crucial one.

APS: So do we need more intelligent software. May be the software development has to be improved radically in order to get more intelligent Content Management Systems?

GMG: Most of the software totally sucks. But it is not getting any better. All automated classification systems so far failed. What we need are smarter people, not smarter software. In most of the cases it is better to search with the Google Search Engine than to look to find something on a company's search engine. That is an extraordinary statement showing the awfulness of organizational content management and search engines. And often it's not because of the software, but how the content has been created. One of the most simple mistakes which happens all over the world is the thing called the title metatag. In most cases it's not written properly. The problems are much more focussed on the processes and the training on people.

APS: Another key problem is may be, that the future doesn't belong to Content Management but on Context Management for the content?

GMG: Sure. Let me give you a simple example. In all this information architecture, it's ultimately an editorial decision. If I am in the process of buying a laptop, what are my trigger words. They are 'notebook' or 'laptop.' When I am buying a computer I don't want to look at 300 laptops. So now you go down to a deeper level, so I am looking for the words 'mobile' or 'ultra portable' now.

These metadata give you the context: am I on the right page. If you don't get answers on this metadata immediately, you get annoyed. So on a next level, don't tell me about processing power, tell me instead about the battery and the weight. Because if I'm someone looking for a ultra portable laptop, then I'm primarily concerned with weight and battery life.

You will never get software to figure out the laptop you need, for this you need editors who think about the customer problems. People behave on the web based on what they read. In most organizations the editorial thinking is missing. The best organizations have excellent editors. They don't spend their days looking at text, they are asking what does the customer want. How do I create content that meets or creates a need. 99 % of the people that visit the Microsoft-homepage look at 1 % of the content. Most web teams sit in cocoons; they don't come out and ask the customers. A good editor will always talk to his readers to get feedback.

APS: Can you give us an example how an editor should think?

GMG: Look at the former Novartis-site. It was designed for doctors. But after analysing the readers, they found out that only 7 % of those who went to the Novartis-site were doctors. Over 60 % of the readers were this brand new category called patients and caregivers. Gradually, Novartis has realized here is the audience they can reach. So the consequence was a reshaping of the content.

The first thing a publication has to do is to establish trust. Where would you go if you were looking for health information. Probably not to a drug company website. But many drug company websites publish lots of general health information. Why? Should they not be focusing on their product information? Isn't that why someone would go to a drug company website?

APS: Steve Case said, when he was CEO of America Online, that the Internet will make every company a publisher?

GMG: There are two facts about the Web that are vastly under-appreciated. The first is that the primary thing people do on the Web is read. The second fact is that readers come to the web to gather content. Think about it for a moment. Readers come to the Web to gather or review content, rather than specifically to search or find content. The difference is subtle, but it's critical. Most of the time the reader doesn't know exactly what content they are looking for. The traditional approach of content management deals reasonably well with readers who know the exact name of the document they are looking for. But it deals very poorly with readers who have a general idea of what they want. In other words, the approach to dealing with content that most organizations have today fails for most of its readers most of the time. The results we see everywhere. It's called information overload.

APS: So what do you think is the solution to the overload problem?

GMG: This is a critical challenge. The possibilities to create huge amounts of content are much bigger than our abilities to read those billions of documents. What's the secret that will make your website succeed where so many others fail? The secret can be summarized in one word: Publishing! The Web is a medium for publishing content. The modern world runs on content. We're either publishers or consumers of it. Mostly, we're both. Content is written-down intellectual capital. It is the lifeblood of the information organization and the publishing processes and systems are its heart and arteries. The organization that doesn't understand how to publish content professionally will play a diminishing role in an increasingly information-driven economy. In a world dominated by

information, publishing skills are no longer something that's nice to have. They are a must have. Digital content is becoming key to a company's ability to develop and expand commerce, foster collaboration and to personalize sales and customer services. Therefore, content is critical. What's more, the Web is going to remain a publishing medium for text-based content for the next 20 years at least.

APS: The publishing industry is in a crisis. Advertising is not giving any value to growing companies. It is public relations through content production that helps to make a company more popular. This process is more and more virtual and not physical. What are the consequences for the publishing industry?

GMG: According to a 2000 study by the University of California, Berkeley, printed content represents 0.003 percent of all content published annually in the world. Where the hell is all the rest of it published? The vast majority of content in the world can be found on computer disks. In comparison to computers, print publishing is not at the races. For every book printed there are some 30,000 'books' published on computers. Publishing may suck, but getting better at publishing is the only way you're going to get better at content. Print publishing has some quality control. On computers, too much gets published. That's no good. So, the business world may be moving more to a public relations mode, but if it overburdens the consumer with messages, that won't achieve much.

The essence of publishing is communication. Tim Berners Lee invented the World Wide Web because he realized that the traditional tools of publishing were not working. So he had to find a solution to get the right information to the right people at the right time.

APS: So we could say that the internet is a matching platform for content. What are the critical issues to publish content?

GMG: Technology can make the communication more efficient, but technology can never write a personal reply that really answers the question of a specific problem. Publishing means "to make public". In the knowledge economy we are all publishers. Publishing supports the sale of our products and services. It tells people why they should buy something, how they get it to work, and how to fix it when it goes wrong. Publishing is also about quality control. You will reject far more than you will publish. In publishing, less is invariably more. Critical content is precise and to the point. In this information overloaded world there has never been a greater need to keep it short, simple and snappy. The reader is king. If nobody reads you, you're dead. 'Time-to-publish' is critical. It's not enough to have great content if you don't get it to your reader before your

competitor does. A viable publisher knows how to make money – either directly or indirectly – out of content. The key difference between commerce and ecommerce is that commerce is selling with people and ecommerce is selling with content.

APS: So publishing makes the difference of being seen or not seen. So if Shakespeare would still live, would he say: To publish or not to publish?

GMG: Absolutely. Don't forget that academics were the original information workers. Universities were the original information organizations. The modern organization and individual can learn much with regard to becoming a better 'information organization' by observing how academics and universities have dealt with content. The university is the home of the Internet. The Internet was invented by the US military in conjunction with several universities. The Web was invented in a research organization. Then the Internet and Web were embraced by universities around the world because academics and students saw in them tools for the better communication of ideas.

APS: So on the down side of your value chain you have your customer, on the upper side we have the knowledge worker. How are they influenced through the Internet?

GMG: The university is the original knowledge organization, because the fundamental function of a university is to transfer knowledge either to a student or a wider population. And there are two ways a university does that: through teaching and through publishing. What are the characteristics of the modern academic information organization and worker? They publish more than ever. About 4,000 academic papers are published every day in the United States alone. "Publish or perish" has long been a motto for those who work in academia. Today, it becomes a motto for all information workers. If you don't publish, you're not visible. If you're not visible, you're not important.

APS: A very important topic in knowledge management is that it's much more difficult to write a small article than a long one. Would you agree?

GMG: Absolutely. It's much harder to write 500 words than 3,000 or 5,000 words. The search engines have moved out of most of the meta data and now have moved to what is called the visible meta data of the page. They now give much greater priority to the content at the top of the page than to the content at the bottom. 95 % of the people don't go beyond the first page of a search in a search engine. So if you are not on the first page you won't be found. So you

must write your content a way it maximizes its indexability and its chance of getting attention. So it is very important to get the most important key words you write about into the first 50 words of your publication. Most search engines stop indexing after the first 500 words.. There are systems out there that tell you how people are searching. It is very important to make this sort of analysis first and then integrate the searching pattern into the content you are writing. Understand how people search—and use the keywords they use while searching in your writing. On the web, writing is much shorter. You get much more regular publishing of short pieces of content.

APS: Is there not a big challenge? On one side there is a wish that all departments should be able to publish and on the other side there is also a need for a senior editor?

GMG: You know, that is how big newspapers or magazines are publishing. You get what's called a managing editor and you have expert editors in their own areas. Then you have a style guide for the strategy of communication. The managing editor sets topics and works with the editors to get cohesion. Some organizations are much more adaptable to this environment, some do a horrible job and don't care about a communication strategy. Today it is getting more and more important for companies to establish an editorial board to get a formal structure of the content.

Publishers create a new type of marketing which is now content-driven. Traditionally, marketers seek to get attention, but the difference in web-marketing is to give attention. If somebody comes to your website you have already got their attention. Now he wants a question to be answered. Very often marketers don't get the point. The most well-known brand which has emerged in the last three years is Google. It achieved this position not by advertising, but by helping people quickly and effectively do what they came to Google to do—and that was to search. Yahoo and Napster also did no advertising to promote their brands.

APS: So somebody in the top-management is needed who cares about the communication. So do we need a chief communication officer?

GMG: Yes I think so, too. Somebody in the top management must understand content. Even chief information officers in company often don't understand what information means. Peter Drucker said, that the last 50 years we focussed on the T in IT, but the next 50 years we should focus on the I, how we handle information.

APS: Websites are often in a poor condition. They look like garbage. Have we forgotten the primary function why a website is designed?

GMG: Think of your website as a publication. Think of the person who visits your website as a reader and your objectives become clearer. Web publishing has different dynamics and rules than, say, print publishing. But the core objective is still the same: to communicate with other people. For centuries humans have described their tools and the people who use them by their primary function. We don't call people horse users, car users or pen users. We call them riders, drivers and writers. The fact that we have not described the Web and the people who use it by their primary function has led to great confusion. Websites are publications, because that is the primary function of a website. The Internet is more interactive and transaction-driven than traditional publications, but it's still a publication. Like all publications it's a place where people come to be informed about stuff. The highly educated web reader comes to your website with the objective of finding stuff that will make him more knowledgeable and allows him to make decisions.

APS: So what do you think is the future of Peer-to-Peer- and Open Source-Systems for Knowledge Management?

GMG: The whole open source area has a lot of potential. The basic principle of open source is cooperation, but the interfaces are not very customer-friendly. Simplicity of an interface is a huge driver for success. From a content management perspective, the main question is, is it easy for a writer to handle the system. Often the interface is the last question asked about when a system is being bought, but it should be the first. If it's difficult to update a website there is a huge resistance to work with the software.

APS: When people are talking about peer-to-peer-systems, they also speak of an organizational revolution?

GMG: It's been an old principle of capitalism for many centuries that somebody should be in charge. As Peter Drucker said, somebody has to make decisions. Good collaboration is necessary, but it is not successful if a company has no leadership and excellent management skills. Another myth is, that people want personali-zation. In the United States for some commercial websites, 25 % of the respondents said, that they won't buy something if the site is personalized because they want to protect their privacy.

APS: Gerry, Blue Planet Team Network thanks you for your excellent statements.