

Content Brief

I written about, and we've talked about, the difficulties in dealing with content for the Web. I think many of you agree with me that content is probably the hardest part of getting any kind of Web site up and running and that it's made especially so when it comes to working with content outside of your own control.

I know that over the years this has been the single largest source of headaches for me when dealing with clients and internal stakeholders. Even at Boeing, where I had dedicated writer and editors, the content issue would present itself as an almost daily problem.

At my current gig it seems that getting the content we need is the single biggest barrier to making sure our sites are as good as can be. I've been trying very hard, to varying degrees of success, to find ways to make our experience with clients and content easier.

One that shows great promise is the use of a content brief.

Missing: A Formal Plan for Content

I've borne witness to quite a few Web design and development methodologies and up until a few months ago, I'd never seen one that formally addressed content. The first I ever saw was over at got media and even though they do talk quite a bit about content, and Kelly's book has some great tips relating to content, they didn't seem to address content in a formal manner.

I kept thinking to myself, "we spend so much time on the technical and design aspects of our projects. We walk the stakeholders all the way through that stuff, but we don't spend near enough time on content. Then we act surprised when they don't get it."

This is something I'd just never really thought about until recently. Then again, I've never been in a position to really take control of a process and change it up before.

Now at PBDH they had a pretty solid process in place that addressed the content adequately, or as good as I'd seen. The problem is, it wasn't (and honestly still probably isn't) enough. So I did some brainstorming and came up with something I think may help.

Enter the Content Brief

Just about every process I've worked with has had a Creative Brief that helps inform the design and creative process. This document usually is where you'll find any information relating to the content for a Web site.

I'm thinking that content is important enough, and problematic enough, to warrant it's own brief.

What I've done is taken the creative brief and simply separated the content stuff. This allows not only for more focus on the content, but opens a new opportunity to help discuss the content and hopefully impress its importance to stakeholders.

Content Brief: Nuts and Bolts

The format of the brief can be whatever works best and it should be adjusted to suit your stakeholders, much like you'd do with a creative or technical brief. I've only used this a few times and I'm still working to try and get what I feel works best. There is an example in the Jellyfish library.

In general what the content brief will do is:

Clearly define roles. This is very important. You need to clearly show your stakeholders that they need to be involved in the process.

Give a short overview. Just summarize the needs, goals and challenges of the project in relation to the content. Give an overview of the types of content needed. I don't get too page specific here as I use Page Description Diagrams for that.

Define the audiences. Knowing who your content is for is very important. This is necessary to help your content creators do the best job possible.

Plan and schedule for delivery. I try to put down, in simple, clear terms, what we need to receive from the content contributors, etc. and when it's needed. I mention any potential problems and try to be as frank as possible to help ensure we get what we need, when we need it.

It's important to keep in mind that this document should work in concert with your other briefs and other informing documents. I refer to our personas and wireframes, etc. quite frequently in the content brief.

A Work In Progress

Again, this has been only marginally tested and while it seems to be working pretty well, and in theory should help quite a bit, I'm still seeing some of the same old problems I saw before I tried this out. Having said that, I feel that it's worthwhile and will continue to use a content brief for my projects. If nothing else it helps open, and keep open, a running dialogue with clients and stakeholders about the importance of content.

In other-words, what it doesn't make up for in time, it should make up for in quality and peace-of-mind. I'd love to hear what y'all thought and any ideas, question or suggestion would be great also.