

Content Strategy Compulsory Reads: Content Strategy for the Web (2nd edition) by Kristina Halvorson and Melissa Rach

The second edition of the "Content Strategy for the Web" by Kristina Halvorson and Melissa Rach is one of the most frequently cited content strategy publications. For a good reason! In this literature review, you will find out how the book shaped the way content strategy was talked about and practised, making it into the exciting field we get to participate in today.

There is a group of trailblazing professionals, content strategy celebrities if you will, whose names sooner or later crop up in discussions, readings, or random online searches on the topic of content strategy. Kristina Halvorson is one of them.

For us at FH Joanneum, "Content Strategy for the Web" is our bread and butter. The book features on the essential reading list before we even set foot in the (virtual) classroom for the first time and is part of the recommended reading list for a few courses in the first semester:

- Content Audits with Paula Ladenburg Land;
- Brand Values & Message Architecture with Margot Bloomstein;
- and the Content Analysis Workshop.

In this literature review, we are going to cover the contents of the book, as well as give a glimpse into the type of advice aspiring and experienced content strategists alike can hope to learn from this publication.

About the Authors

For those not yet in the know, Kristina Halvorson is one of the pioneers of the content strategy discipline as we know it. She is the founder of [Brain Traffic](#), a content strategy as a service consultancy; producer of the popular Confab and Button conferences; and host of the renowned [Content Strategy Podcast by Brain Traffic](#), regularly interviewing prominent experts in our field. The first edition of Halvorson's book was released in 2009 (the year when Kristina and Karen McGrane set the first Content Strategy Consortium into motion) and immediately became widely recognized as a pivotal text in introducing the concept of content strategy on the web to a broader audience.

When the second edition of "Content Strategy for the Web" was published three years later in 2012, the original book had already been branded as "probably the most-referenced work amongst content strategists for over a decade" (Bailie, 2021). With Melanie Rach officially joining the author byline (in the 2009 version, Melissa, at the time Vice President of Content Strategy at Brain Traffic, stepped in last minute to serve as technical editor and created much of the methodology discussed in chapters 4-6), the second print brought a revised structure and more space dedicated to practical implementation, collaboration, workflows and governance, as well as content strategy ambassadorship. In Kristina and Melissa's own words from the book's foreword, the conversations around content strategy and the field's rapid evolution called for a completely new focus for the 2nd edition.

A Note about the Title

Preemptively (and following the authors' lead), we would like to explain "the Web" part of the book's title.

The conversations about content, its origin, and pre-Internet handling aside, Kristina cleverly picked up on what excites and scares organisations the most. Before having a company website was as universal as a company postal address, organisations did not have to worry about the scrutiny of hundreds, if not millions, eyes that would assess their content. It was printed or locked in internal databases. The chaos and consequences, write the authors, were invisible.

It all changed when the websites came. Suddenly, the content was for all to see, and mistakes were costly - not in terms of hurt feelings (can you really quantify that?) but in sales, reputation, and loyalty.

“Content Strategy for the Web” takes on the web as the first subject of a content strategy project that anyone willing can take on. “Focusing on the web is still the easiest way to learn about content strategy,” they write.

But the advice in this book is universal. Once you master that skill, you will be able to see the potential of content strategy across different platforms and applications.

How is the Content Strategy for the Web (2nd edition) structured?

The second edition opens with a foreword by Sarah Cancilla of Facebook, at the time, a testament to how far content strategy had managed to travel since the first “Content Strategy for the Web” hit the shelves in 2009. Sarah climbed the steps of content strategy from contract writer to Lead Content Strategist at eBay, later joining Facebook as the Founding Content Strategist to pioneer the discipline in the swanky headquarters of the social media giant in Palo Alto. Currently serving as the Director of Content Design at Meta, Sarah’s foreword is really a tribute to Kristina’s work in spotlighting content strategy and “returning a favour” - in the fourth paragraph, we read how the worn-out copy of the book accompanied Sarag to her interview at Facebook that landed her the content strategist job.

Following the candid recollections of the early stages of content strategy at Facebook, the pages are turned over to the authors who, in true content strategist fashion, set the expectations as to what the book is and what it isn’t.

The book is an introduction to the practice of content strategy for the web, broken into chapters that will accompany any adventurer on their new path towards better content. The book’s intro firmly asserts that the advice will be, first and foremost, practical. Amongst the methodologies, models, and tools described in the book, the reader can expect to learn about content strategy project management with its similarities and differences to any other project.

The book is not a thorough exploration of different areas of content strategy or disciplines that are part of it. This is intentional: firstly, the authors wanted an actionable book that steers the readers through the steps to execute their own content strategy project. If they were to take detours into localization or SEO, the publication would be far from the digestible 248 pages peppered with words of encouragement.

Secondly, not every company needs a content strategy project with all bells and whistles. The purpose of the book is to make the first foray into content strategy (or the fifth, but this time, accompanied by two top experts in the field) and understand if perhaps a specialised topic is needed in the next phases of the project.

Finally, and very pragmatically, the authors give credit when it is due and mention professionals who dig deeper into different areas adjacent to content strategy, such as UX, information architecture, and copywriting in the book. There is also a handy reading list at the end of the book to help the reader continue their exploration of different topics within content strategy from leading practitioners.

Now that we cleared the premise of the book, let's get to the good stuff.

The second edition of "Content Strategy for the Web" consists of four main parts: Reality, Discover, Strategy, and Success.

Foreword by Sarah Cancelli, Facebook

Before We Begin...

Reality

1. Now
2. Problem
3. Solution

Discovery

1. Alignment
2. Audit
3. Analysis

Strategy

1. Core
2. Content
3. People

Success

1. Persuasion
2. Advocacy
3. Hero

Content Strategy Reading List

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Table 1. Table of contents of the Content Strategy for the Web (2nd edition).

Each chapter takes the reader a step further into a comprehensive content strategy project, uncovering the strategies and tools needed to gain a better understanding of practical implementation. This is the real trick of the book: by the time you read through the concise and concrete chapters peppered with insider information, you will have a working knowledge of executing a content strategy project in the context of your organisation.

Let's dig into the four sections in detail next.

Understanding the Reality of Your Content

In the first part of the book titled "Reality", we are walked through the basics of content strategy and how its purpose-driven approach sets the tone for how we should perceive content. The questions about user and business needs are asked early on - and if you have been part of the

content strategy community, you know that they will not ease off until the notion of content usefulness is seared into your mind.

Content challenges are rarely exclusively about content. They are a symptom of a company that was led down a path of “More is always better” and measured content’s success in quantity or presentation but never in user reception or impact on sales. A high cost of content with little or no returns is a byproduct of a strategy based on assumptions.

We are also introduced to the cardinal sins of content:

- the constant push for producing content without reflection,
- lack of clarity about existing content,
- content politics and failure to collaborate, and
- missing content chain of command.

Content in modern organisations is an afterthought that does not support the company in its operations because it’s created in a complete disconnect from the business strategy.

“The reality is that, within most organizations, content has always been an afterthought—it’s considered a byproduct of people’s everyday efforts, rather than an asset that requires strategic consideration. No one accurately plans for it. No one has time to slow down and think about it. It’s last on the list of things to spend time, money, or effort on.”

Chapter 1 - Now, “Content Strategy for the Web” (2nd edition)

Towards the end of the chapter, the reader is absolved from believing the misconceptions of modern content operations on account of not knowing better and given some food for thought about the real purpose of content: to support business objectives and fulfil user needs.

Eventually, we stumble into the warm embrace of Brain Traffic's famed content strategy quad, which visualises the different components of content strategy. A note here: the version included in the book is the “old” 2010 quad. It was renewed in 2018 to reflect the evolution of content strategy and what it addresses - [you can view the updated quad here](#).



The Content Strategy Quad © 2010 Brain Traffic

Brain Traffic

Figure 1. The first rendition of the Content Strategy Quad, which is included and discussed in “Content Strategy for the Web”.

With a couple of pieces of helpful advice on connecting with stakeholders ahead of content strategy work and a nod of encouragement (“Fake it til you make it”), we are sent off into the realm of audits.

Building Common Ground in Content Projects

One of the big differences between the first and second editions of the “Content Strategy for the Web” is the latter’s focus on people.

Content strategy is inherently collaborative because content in any organisation is owned by multiple people. Many of your coworkers would have touched content at some point in its lifetime and that makes them part of your content strategy. The authors kick the “Discovery” chapter off with a thorough lesson on alignment and creating common understanding, not consensus.

Conversely, the topic of people and their role in content strategy projects is very often discussed by Kristina and her guests in the Content Strategy Podcast, for example, in the oldie but goldie episode with [Jeff Eaton on the subject of “Content Inventories and Large-Scale Governance”](#).

Back to the main programme!

Identifying content strategy stakeholders is one of the first steps in the alignment phase of your project. Here, the traditional stakeholder roles do not apply because, as stated previously, content has the amazing ability to be spread throughout organisations (sometimes, without the organisation in question being aware). Kristina and Melanie recommend identifying stakeholders by how they impact the project and not by their area of expertise—a common thread of focusing on responsibilities rather than roles when it comes to content.

Once the team is on board, it's time to audit.

Despite the scary name, an audit is a powerful tool for discovering existing content and understanding its quality. The book walks the reader through the two main audit types - [quantitative inventory](#) and qualitative assessment - digging into different metrics, criteria, and scoring methods to uncover insights relevant to each individual content strategy. The analysis part wraps up with a helpful chapter on presenting the results of your inquiry to get buy-in from the decision-makers and your co-workers (both groups are eagerly awaiting the life-changing content strategy that you are cooking up).

(If you would like to explore the universe of audits a bit more, we recommend reading [Content Audits and Inventories – A Handbook by Paula Ladenburg Land.](#))

Crafting Your Content Strategy: Navigating Insights and Priorities

In the third part of the book, the content strategist (you) will take the insights from the discovery phase and flesh out the content strategy. This is notably the most resource-packed part of the book - in a good way!

The internal soul-searching, content team-shaping exercise, and thorough analysis led to the moment of laying out all the facts and findings and mercilessly prioritising. Kristina and Melissa point the lens of realism and pragmatism at the recently unburied content, aspirations, and goals to draft a strategy that can be actioned. They advise to formulate an effective content strategy with an understanding that content needs to be flexible and adapt to the changing environment. While the core strategy statement should be aspirational and motivate employees to want to be part of it, don't forget the lessons you learned in the process.

“Connecting the content components and people components is one of the most important roles that content strategy plays in your organization.”

Chapter 8 - Content, “Content Strategy for the Web” (2nd edition)

This chapter also underlines the importance of purpose in content creation: messaging, topics, voice and tone, as well as content sources need to be aligned with what you want your content to do. This brings the conversation back to the content strategy's imperative: getting the right content, to the right people, in the right place, at the right time (Halvorson, 2018).

The authors guide readers through every method, tool, or concept discussed in the strategy-planning chapter with tips on how to keep their eyes on the prize. Amongst templates and case studies, they bring up an extensive list of elements that make up a robust content strategy: topic maps, channels, UX, as well as different tools that streamline a content strategist's workflow.

Navigating Content Strategy Governance and Workflows

Last but not least, the final chapter in part three of the book is dedicated to people.

As previously discussed, the human aspect is part of a successful content strategy in the planning and discovery phases. However, the importance of people only increases down the line - specifically when governance and workflows enter the chat.

The most detailed content strategy will fail if it's not supported by clear processes and governance. In fact, content strategy's superpower lies in the fact that content created according to the process mapped out by Halverson and Rach can live a long and successful life because it's being managed after publication. In this chapter, the authors discuss different approaches to accountability and role assignment ("These roles do not need to be job titles; they are areas of responsibility."), as well as how to design content strategy workflows that cover the entire content lifecycle.

Next to discussing models and process visualisations, the authors generously provide a list of tasks that are commonly part of different stages of the content lifecycle, as well as tools that could be useful to navigate these processes - from checklists to editorial calendars.

With the content strategy document firmly in hand, the next (and last) step is to present it to your company.

Getting Content Strategy Buy-in

The final chapters of the book - sitting within part four with the promising name of "Success" - are a compilation of advice on getting that much-needed buy-in - from your superiors and your peers.

All the work put into preparing a tailored content strategy that adequately and accurately addresses the challenges of the company and provides a clear path to delivering the right type of content to the customers is not the story to tell during the Big Meeting.

Kristina and Melissa underline the value of - surprise, surprise - understanding what your audience wants. In this case, your coworkers care about the impact of content strategy on their lives, such as improved work processes that make their lives easier. If you have conducted stakeholder interviews, writes Kristina, you probably know their biggest pain points and what frustrates them in the current content operations. Put content strategy in the context of their world.

After you grab their attention, give them the details of your plan: the goals of the project, the scope of the project, the timeline, and role distribution. Let them know what tools will be made available to them to make the content strategy a manageable reality. Again, the level of detail and approach will very much vary depending on your audience, but some themes are universally recommended, such as comparison to competitors, analytics from your audit ("The numbers say it all") or gains in efficiency if your proposal is adopted. Don't worry, there is a part on discussing budgets too.

Becoming a Content Strategy Advocate

After 10 resource-packed chapters of the book, "Content Strategy for the Web" closes with a request.

In the last two chapters, the conversation shifts to a call to arms. Content strategy is a relatively young discipline, and people who find it valuable are invited to join the ranks of the content strategy acolytes. For some, this might be an unexpected turn, having read over 200 pages of strategic advice on transforming how content is viewed in their organisations.

However, it makes sense the more you consider that championing content with purpose at the centre means better content overall. When all is said and done, everyone is a content consumer.

With the ever-increasing numbers of content strategy experts, we can rid the world of bad content. The sky is the limit

Reception

If you would like to read more from Kristina and her team, visit the official website of Brain Traffic. <https://www.braintraffic.com/>

We also recommend checking out the Content Strategy Podcast by Brain Traffic: <https://www.contentstrategy.com/>

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