Why Would Anybody Read This? Creating Online Content for Busy Professionals

By Elie Mystal, Executive Editor, Above the Law

You can't teach somebody how to be interesting. You can't even define what interesting is. But you know it when you see it.

Writing on the internet is not the exercise of making boring content seem interesting. That is futile. People buy textbooks when they want to be bored to tears while learning something new. Writing on the internet requires figuring out what is interesting about your content. In fact, if you are writing for a professional audience, you must figure out what is so interesting about your content that the reader should stop working and read your piece.

That's the key difference between old media and new media. When you are dealing with a book or a newspaper, the reader has already determined to set aside time to consume that content. The content producer "wins" at the point of sale. The reader bought it and now they are committed to spending some amount of time with it.

Nobody sits down and decides to "read the internet." Increasingly, it's very rare for a reader to commit to even reading a particular site on the internet. Instead, "users" (not readers) commit only to surfing around for whatever is interesting to them, for as long as they feel like it, until it's time to stop and do something "productive" with their day. Users make no commitment to your content, and they are just as likely as not to hyperlink away to something more interesting in the middle of your sentence. If somebody reads your headline but does not make it all the way to the end, you, the content producer, lost. You were boring and brought shame to your family and ancestors.

The busier the person, the lower their commitment to your content. Unless they have to read you for work, your content is a procrastination. Every time I write a piece, I think "what could I possibly say to make somebody else not do their job for five minutes?"

There are no tricks that can make a user interested about something that they don't care about. Jane Austen was a fantastic writer, and I wouldn't read another one of her novels if she came back to life and kept my eyes open with toothpicks. But there are some best practices to help you gain and keep somebody's attention long enough to read a piece they find interesting. I've decided to highlight four elements I think about with every piece:

1. Headlines Matter More Than You Could Possibly Imagine.

I know that is a "Journalism 101" rule that is so cliche it struggles to retain meaning. But seriously, the headline is more important than all the other words in an article if you want people

to read it. You should be spending at least as much time crafting the headline as any "section" of your piece.

What is a good headline? There are entire books devoted to the subject, but a good shorthand is "The shortest possible way to express the most interesting possible thing about your article." Headlines are reductive, but clear, engaging, but not misleading. They don't all have to be appropriate for the New York Post. But if you really can't think of a catchy headline, you have to question whether there is a reason for your piece to exist in the first place. There have been many articles that I killed because my terrible headline revealed that I was working on an utterly useless article. And there have been entire articles I've written because I came up with a good headline for it.

Headlines are hard to write. Struggling with them is a good sign that you are putting in the appropriate effort. Most likely, you're first headline thought isn't the best one, and you can see that if you go through the effort of writing out multiple headlines to your piece and then comparing them. If you are not willing to work on your headline, you are telling readers that you don't really care if they pay attention to your article.

2. The Hook, You Must Have One.

The "hook" is another J-school term that is often described as the reason your piece has immediate relevancy. I don't find that definition particularly helpful in online media. "18 Pictures Of Cats Who Look Like Child Actors From The 80s" has no relevancy to anybody, at any time. And yet it will be clicked on.

Anymore, the hook is just knowing what your audience wants and giving it to them. Your audience wants to remember what life was like when they were young in the 80s. That's the hook for the cat pics. Gone are the days of telling the audience what they should want. Embrace the era of figuring out where your audience is going anyway so you can lead them.

That doesn't mean you can only write rehashed, derivative pieces that have already been pre-approved by your audience. But it does mean that your hook is something that they are already inclined to like or be interested in. Don't write about vegetables for an audience of carnivores. That's not a hook, it's oral surgery. Instead, tell that audience which vegetables go best with their juicy steaks. "Wait, you mean my steak dinner can taste even better? Tell me more." That's a hook.

A good hook does not exist in a vacuum. You must know all you can about your intended audience. Who they are, what they are doing when they get to your piece, why they are reading on the internet in the first place. Let's say you are writing about fire safety. Here are two different approaches:

* Going for professional parents:

Headline: Are Your Kids On Fire?
Hook: This post will help you spot if your daycare facility is a fire hazard.

* Going for office managers:
Headline: Office-Roasted Recipes
Hook: This post will help you spot fire hazards in the office.

You don't want to write "Ten Tips For Fire Safety." Nobody cares about that. Nobody cares about fire safety until they feel like they are burning. The hook involves applying that heat.

3. What Is Your Value Add?

What do I, the user, get from reading your content that I couldn't get from reading the 15,000 other people on the internet that are or will eventually say the same thing? Please don't say "information." If I wanted information, I'd ask a senior person at my job. I'd call my mentor. I'd search Wikipedia. Information can be the substance, but what are you adding to that information?

A value add can be a lot of different things. It can be an opinion. It can be "voice." It can be pictures. It can be context. Whatever it is, your readers should get something out of reading your article that they can't get anywhere else. It's personal and specific to the piece.

Having a value add is what makes your content stand out. Unfortunately, standing out is "risky" and many content producers are afraid to do it. It's safer to fade into the white noise of "articles on the internet" and hope that readers do the work of finding value in a piece. But because readers have invested nothing more than a click in getting to the content, it's easy for most of them to click away and disregard it if they're not getting anything from an article. Don't make your readers work, remember that they have real jobs that pay them to pretend that something boring is actually really important.

If you want users to actually stay and read, you have to take the risk of saying something. Don't tell them five facts, tell them which of those five facts is the most important and why. That's a value add. If you are adding value, you are opening yourself up to criticism. That is a good thing, criticism is a form of user engagement. But you are also opening yourself up to people agreeing with you. You are, potentially, helping people. You are validating the user's decision to click on your article.

If writing on the internet involves demanding attention from your audience, having a value add upholds your end of the bargain. They invested in reading, you didn't waste their time.

4. Ask The User To Engage

What do you want a user to do with your article? Read it and think about how awesome you are? That's egotistical. Do you want them to learn something? Who elected you king of what your readers need to learn?

Again, books have **readers** who can consume the content wherever they want to, at their own pace, for their own purposes. The internet has **users** who want to know what they can do with this thing you are trying to push in front of their faces. Can they implement it, can they share it, are they entertained, are they part of a cultural zeitgeist? The internet is an interactive place, people expect to do more with content than just read it and think.

I try to think of my content as a conversation, not a lecture. Here's one side of a normal human conversation: "Did you see this? What do you think about it? Well, I have some thoughts. Anyway, gotta go, let's talk some more tomorrow."

All of those elements can also be conveyed in a piece of content if you think about it like a person and not a typing robot:

- "Did you see this?" = The underlying news story, statistic, or trend you are talking about. This is your hook.
- "What did you think about it?" = References to what others have said or observed about about your item.
- "I have some thoughts." = Your point. Let's hope you have a point or why are your writing? This is your value add.
- "Let's talk tomorrow." = An indication that your point can be discussed further in the comments, on social media, or through links, reader polls, or something.

Online content cannot look static. It's not a flower that can observed in all it's glory, it's a fruit that somebody should be able to hold, taste, and throw back at you if it is rotten. You have to give people a way to experience your content. Give them a quiz, make a map, incorporate user feedback, make it quotable and shareable. If consumption of your content just requires a "click," then a click is all you are going to get.

Not every piece will have a great headline, a thrilling hook, a poignant value add, and easy opportunities for user engagement. But every piece should try to have all of those elements. If you get all of that right, you just might get professionals to take a break out of their day and read your content.

Want to discuss content creation or content promotion further? Above the Law and Breaking Media have a custom content studio ready to help. Contact advertising@abovethelaw.com to set up a call, or check out some of our sample work below:
- [Top Outside Counsel Rankings](#)
- [Law School Survivor Series](#)
- [Millennial Lawyer Survey](#)