

## To Cash in with Content, Optimize for Browsing, Not Just Search

It seems to me there are exactly two ways to use and deploy content on Web sites. As marketers, I think we've focused too much effort on one way: *answer my question*, while not spending enough energy on the other: *tell me something*. Too often we're building sites that solve only half of visitors needs. At our own peril, we're not listening to the people who use the sites we build and deploy. And we lose out on the full value of cashing in.

The more obvious way to use content is to help users answer my question. In the purest form, a site like [www.google.com](http://www.google.com) exists only to answer questions. With a site organized around answering questions, users must already know what they want before proceeding. But people also need sites to tell them something. Contrast Google with [www.drudgereport.com](http://www.drudgereport.com). The Drudge Report doesn't answer questions, it tells us stuff we did not think to ask.

### An example from the world of music

I love Madonna: she's cool; she makes catchy music. Not only great in concert (Tokyo 1987), Madonna is also a marketing genius. Our respective careers began in Manhattan around the same time. We even frequented the same after-hours clubs (remember 2 a.m. dancing at Pyramid in the early 1980s?), though I didn't know it until I read about it online. In fact, I'll read most Madonna stories I run across—"run across" being the key part of that phrase. From [www.thesun.co.uk](http://www.thesun.co.uk), I learned about her stage role in London's West End. A report in [www.publishersweekly.com](http://www.publishersweekly.com) reported that a new Madonna tell-all is due in stores and provided me with the opportunity to read a pre-publication review. Amazon.com has her DVDs on sale and lets me hear sample clips from her CDs. But here's the interesting thing: I have never, ever performed a search on Madonna, nor have I ever "personalized" a site with my interest in Madonna. And the fact is, there are hundreds of things that interest me as much (or more) than Madonna that I've likely never searched on or personalized for either. My Madonna content, as well as information on thousands of other things, comes to me rather than sitting and waiting for me to seek it out. The sites I frequent tell me something.

Sadly, most organizations' Web sites organize primarily around providing answers to questions we think visitors already have in mind. We arrogantly believe people always visit our site simply to find a piece of information they already know they need.

### The two ways to use content

Of course, we all use information both ways, but likely haven't actually thought about the differences. At conferences, I like to ask the following question: "how many of you read a daily newspaper, either online or in print?" The answer is always almost 100%. I then ask the room "Why? We all have access to Google news and other information services!" Of course by then, with the set up complete, I answer my own question: "because a newspaper tells us something we didn't think to ask."

We've all got loads of subjects that interest us: work-related issues, family, hobbies, travel, kids, parents, health, and much more. If you're like me, you can't possibly do a search or personalize on all the topics that interest you. So we live an online life organized so we'll stumble across things. We like serendipity. Bookmarks, email newsletters, and other online tools facilitate our favorite sites and services telling us something we didn't think to ask.

I encourage all marketing professionals to be conscious of the two ways visitors consume information. All Web sites and blogs (as well as intranets and extranets) should organize accordingly. Encourage serendipity. Embrace easy ways to browse. Establish enewsletters. Write a blog. Create and post interesting tables, charts, or graphs. Write and offer a free guide to something. Hire an editor to keep your pages fresh. Assume that visitors want you to tell them what to read rather than rely on the search for information happening the other way around.