



Content Strategy with Hilary Marsh

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 330

Hilary Marsh: [00:00:00] But always you have to think about who's the audience, why do they need this, and what does success look like? And then you'll see what to create more of, what to create less of. What are gaps that you might want to start creating content about? And then there's the hardest question of all: What to stop?

Celisa Steele: [00:00:22] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:24] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:33] Welcome to episode 330, which features a conversation with Hilary Marsh. Hilary is president and chief strategist at Content Company, and she's been consulting, teaching, and advocating for content strategies since 1999—meaning she's been doing this work even before content was cool. Hilary and Jeff talk about the importance of a whole-organization content strategy, the need to orchestrate content efforts to avoid a cacophony, the importance of viewing your content from the consumer point of view, the rise in the role of content strategists, and more. This is a must-listen episode if your learning business could benefit from a more strategic approach to creating and promoting content. Jeff and Hilary spoke in October 2022.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:26] Can you tell us a little bit more about the work that you do at the Content Company? What does that look like on an ongoing basis?

Hilary Marsh: [00:01:33] Sure. So I say that I work with content-rich organizations, and that is an interesting combination of professional associations, nonprofits, educational institutions, and even, surprisingly, corporate intranets. And the thing that they have in common is that, like I said, they're content-rich. So content is what they do.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:58] And so you're helping them to work with that content, get more value out of that content, identify the right content?

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Hilary Marsh: [00:02:06] Well, since content is what they do, really the work is about making sure that it is published or created or shared with the world in a way that it most resonates with the audience it's for, and, in a way that sounds like, well, of course they would do that, except they don't always, surprisingly, because what they do is create this amazing set of programs, products, and services, but they do it with their own internal subject matter expert lens on. So they don't always make the connection between the importance of what they're doing and how to make sure that the people getting the information really understand the importance and the value to them.

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:54] Now, content is obviously important. It's become a huge part of our lives, particularly because of what technology has made possible—so much more content can be created and consumed. But it does still feel pretty specific as a focus for a company. And I'd love to hear more about your journey, would like listeners to hear more about your journey. How did you develop such a deep interest in content and then decide to create an entire company that's devoted to effectively leveraging content?

Hilary Marsh: [00:03:25] Sure. So that's actually two separate questions, and I want to address the first one first. What I mean by content is not necessarily what you would think because, if an association, for example, creates a program or a product, really the way that that manifests itself in the world is as words and pictures and audio and video. And so, when I say that they're content-rich organizations, the work they do is content—a course, a conference program, a book, magazine article. All of it is content. Research reports, advocacy work. So all of that work is content. So, when you said content is everywhere, in the kinds of organizations that I work with, there's really almost nothing they do that isn't content. So that's one thing. Separate from that is how did I get here? And so how I got here is I went to school for journalism. And really the role that I play isn't a writer or a journalist but an editor kind of role. And that's what I went to school for. That's what I did in the whole first chunk of my career. And then I pivoted toward Internet and what that meant and what that looked like. And that editorial philosophy is what's missing. That's the piece that hooks content with the audience and content with the purpose and content with a goal. And so that's really the heart of what I do. And the roots of my education are really the work that I do every day and try to add in the organizations that I work with.

Jeff Cobb: [00:05:13] And it may just be the particular lens or bias that that I bring to this, but, when I look at your Web site, when I look at your own content and hear you talk about this, you seem to be very focused on strategy—being strategic with content. And I'm making a leap and assuming that maybe you find most organizations are not particularly strategic or at least are

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not as strategic as they could be with their content. And I'm wondering—assuming that's true, and you can verify or deny—

Hilary Marsh: [00:05:43] Completely true. I'm nodding. But your viewers can't see that—or your listeners.

Jeff Cobb: [00:05:48] Sure. So why is that? What sort of shift in thinking do you find usually has to occur in an organization for content to start playing the role that it could and should play?

Hilary Marsh: [00:06:02] Yeah. So the thing that I wanted to bring in, or one of the examples is that, probably four years ago, I did a project along with two other people for the ASAE Foundation about content strategy adoption and maturity in associations. And so we did find that there are different maturity levels that associations have. And by associations I really mean all of the kinds of organizations I work with. It's equally applicable and true to all of those. But those maturity levels are that greater awareness of the value of content, making it a little bit more methodical and consistent, having goals, measurement, all of those kinds of things. And they can see their own path to maturity. So that's one of the things that I wanted to raise. And I would group the tactics that we identified in the study into seven different groups: strategy, content operations, content quality, audience understanding, content planning and collaboration, taxonomy and metadata, and content structure. So for each of those, and your listeners are going to be saying, "Oh yeah, you know, we really struggle with content quality, and we don't pay enough attention to that equally across the board in all of the different kinds of content we create. So how do we do that?" And so then there's a maturity process to start at the beginning and figure out where you go next in each of those areas. Does that make sense?

Jeff Cobb: [00:07:45] It does. And I'm wondering—I feel like I always have to ask this now as we're talking with experts from different parts of the business world—as COVID happened and as we're emerging from COVID, how have you seen the perspective on content change? In our world, for example—and our worlds overlap a lot—but, obviously in the world of education, organizations had to move online quickly, and some of them were prepared for it had already been doing it. Some were not. But suddenly a lot of content had to go online. A lot of experiences had to go online. And we also found that, quickly or slowly, depending on the organization, they started to realize that their educational content and what they were doing online was actually tightly related to other things they'd already been doing online—their Web site content and everything else. And they were forced to start taking a little bit more of a holistic view of their overall content portfolio, not just their education programming. What did you see, and what are you seeing now?

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Hilary Marsh: [00:08:51] What I saw, especially before the pandemic, was that every group inside an organization did its own thing in its own way. And therefore you have the magazine deciding and planning and creating content on its own and the education department doing what it does on its own and the conference department and the research department and advocacy, all of the different departments creating their own content in their own way. Maybe they work together and collaborate sometimes and maybe not. And I always saw that that was a challenge since often they were doing things that seemed very similar to me. But, during the pandemic, the blur between what is a pre-recorded conference session and the difference between that and a Webinar evaporates because it's the same thing. And so then, if you take away the package and the container that content comes in and just think about content, first of all, wow, associations are creating—or any kind of content-rich organization—are creating far more content than they really realize. And they could have an opportunity if they choose to think more strategically about their content, to step back and say, “Wow, given how much we're doing, are we doing too much? Are we spending our time doing the right things? Is this the right mix? Can people make heads or tails out of what we're offering and find in that grouping of things what's most important to them?” So that blur between the content and the container changed during the pandemic a lot.

Hilary Marsh: [00:10:39] And it was a real wake-up call to have the opportunity to look at their offerings from the outside in. So one of the things I stress a lot is developing a better empathetic sense of who's using your content and why. Don't think about it from the inside out, what you want to tell them. Think about it from the outside in. What pain points do they have? And, if they've got 10 different pain points that you could potentially solve, are you spending 80 percent of your effort on two of those pain points and missing the rest? Are you missing all of them? Are you missing some of them? Should you be? So, again, taking a good strategic outside look at what you're producing and how it solves a person's needs because that's what they come into your organization looking for, not through your lens. Nobody cares about your org chart. They care about themselves and their pain points and their challenges.

Jeff Cobb: [00:11:42] I like that “Nobody cares about your org chart” because we make these silos into things that we think are important, but nobody looking from the outside would think they were that important. And I like that blurring between content and container. That's a great way to put it. We actually found that organizations were starting to realize that they were almost competing with themselves on some of their content because, like you said, they would have these recorded conference sessions that were exactly the same thing as their recorded Webinars. And the recorded Webinars were often also the basis for online courses. And so the

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container was different, but the content really wasn't very, very different at all. And people were having to make choices and were confused. Where should I go with this?

Hilary Marsh: [00:12:23] Right. And so it's interesting because I expected, when I first embarked on this content strategy journey, that most of the organizations that contacted me, the individuals would be in the communications department because that's my background essentially. But, in fact, I have found that more and more it's people from an education background who contact me. And I think it's because they see that, because one of the organization's strategic objectives is to educate the audience, the organization is doing that through multiple ways, through multiple channels and multiple departments, and they identify that those things aren't connected. So it's really the education people who have that perspective where the communications people are focused on the external messages with the media and the particular voice and tone. And, for me, the bigger challenges are the people challenges, organizational challenges that sit more inside the organization.

Jeff Cobb: [00:13:32] Well, kudos to the education people who are recognizing that. And we have seen quite a few who have been recognizing that and expect to see that continue to evolve.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:45] At Tagoras, we're experts in the global business of lifelong learning, and we use our expertise to help clients better understand their markets, connect with new customers, make the right investment decisions, and grow their learning businesses. We achieve these goals through expert market assessment, strategy formulation, and platform selection services. If you are looking for a partner to help your learning business achieve greater reach, revenue, and impact, learn more at tagoras.com/services.

Jeff Cobb: [00:14:19] Now, I'm wondering if an organization has decided it's ready to be much more strategic about its content—so maybe it's reached out to you as somebody who can help them with doing that—is there an essential first step that has to be taken to get things going? And then what are the steps from there?

Hilary Marsh: [00:14:40] Well, the maturity work that I talked about before, and I have a document that lets you assess where you are in maturity as well as a crawl-walk-run roadmap a little bit in terms of deciding what are your most important pain points and your biggest challenges and where you are on those. So that's one way to start. In terms of a project, where to start is a discovery. Who are you, and who's your audience? So that's two-pronged because then we can look at your content and work with you to identify is it working. Is your content

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working to achieve your organizational objectives and to achieve your audience's needs? And then we can go from there.

Jeff Cobb: [00:15:26] So, basically really good solid assessment of you, your audience, and the content that you already have, that connecting the two.

Hilary Marsh: [00:15:36] Right.

Jeff Cobb: [00:15:36] And what about over the longer term? Because I know we—Tagoras, Leading Learning, as an organization—we struggle with our own content and managing it over time, keeping track of what we have, knowing how things are performing, keeping it fresh because you don't want your content to go stale in most instances. I'd love to hear any tips, tricks that you might have for organizations that struggle with that ongoing content management issue.

Hilary Marsh: [00:16:11] I think that the first thing is to really stay focused on who's your audience, what do they need, what is their purpose, and what does success look like? First of all, I think there's a way that newness is a little bit overrated because I think effective content is about what meets that audience's needs. They will not remember what they read six months ago. So, yes, there's another excuse to create something new, to build on that, to summarize that or summarize a whole bunch of different things. So there's content at different levels and different levels of depth and different lenses on the same topic. So the success metrics are a super important piece of that because what do you want to happen as a result of publishing this content? And it's more than just "Call me." It's about why do you want someone to learn this nugget of information? So it's really strategically deciding what nugget am I sharing today? And it might be because you have heard the same question from multiple clients or uncovered information out there that you want to summarize for your particular audience. So there's lots of different ways to use as an impetus for creating content. But always you have to think about who's the audience, why do they need this, and what does success look like? And then you'll see what to create more of, what to create less of. What are gaps that you might want to start creating content about? And then there's the hardest question of all: What to stop? And that "what to stop" piece is so important because often we like creating something. So we create it again and again because we like it. But that doesn't mean that it's really working for you. So this is the idea of using metrics to inform your content decisions. And those are decisions both about the topic, the format, the length, the channel, how you share it. There's so many of those decisions that should be informed by "Is it working?" So it's all about effectiveness at the end of the day.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:18:36] And do you find that most organizations don't make enough use out of whatever. You create a piece of content, and often it's created, is put out there, and it just sort of fades away, and you don't do anything else with it. Sometimes you need to add to it or change or whatever, but a lot of times you just need to put it back out there again. Repeatedly get it in front of the audience, or find different ways to position it. And I'm asking because I think that we're probably guilty of this here at Leading Learning. We'll create something, and then we sort of forget about it, and I'll come across something two years later, I'm like, "Wow! That was actually really valuable. We should have we should have done more with that." And we didn't. And I suspect that happens all the time.

Hilary Marsh: [00:19:22] Or just share it again. Share it again. Really, even if people remember, they'll say to themselves, "Oh yeah, I remember reading about that, and that was really good. I should share that with my boss or use that advice or whatever that is." So it's good to be reminded of something. There's also the whole idea of repurposing content, and a great example that I've used many times is that I used to work for the National Association of Realtors, and they have a very important code of ethics, as many associations do. And so the code of ethics for them has 12 different statements—or I forgot what they're even called now, but basically parts of the code—and each part might have a video or a poster or an instruction manual or testimonials or case studies, different descriptions about why that's important, how it's important, how you use it, what you do. And so one piece of content, really, that's the code of ethics becomes courses, poster, videos, blog posts, articles, many, many, many things. So that's the other way to keep content fresh is that understanding that one article with five bullet points could become five articles, each diving more deeply into one of those points, and five articles then also can be boiled up into one overview. So it's understanding that some people want a higher-level view; some people want a deeper-level view of each of the things that we know. I suffer from the same thing. I'm sure that I don't do it often enough either, frankly, because it's very hard to do for yourself. This is why associations find it valuable to hire consultants because they have an external view.

Jeff Cobb: [00:21:16] And tied to this, and this kind of goes back to the issue of managing content over time, but it's also sort of a governance thing as well, how do you manage to find the opportunities for connecting, reusing, repurposing content across what often are different departments in an organization that have different sets of content, different uses for content? Are you finding more organizations that have somebody who is a dedicated content manager that's looking across the different opportunities within the organization and then consistently finding those opportunities, checking against the metrics, all of those things that you really have

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to do? And it seems like you have to have somebody if not multiple somebodies dedicated to if you're going to really keep doing that consistently over time.

Hilary Marsh: [00:22:06] Yeah, the content strategy profession is really growing. When I first entered the world of associations, I don't think there was anybody with the title content strategist, and now there are hundreds literally. So it's definitely work that associations are doing, which is one of the things that we found very consistently in our research, the research report that I was involved with. And more and more people have that title, and they're doing that work. Sometimes people are doing the work, and they don't have the title, but that doesn't matter. Often the content strategy person isn't just a content manager; they're at a higher level, and they need to be at a higher level, in my opinion, in order to have the organizational impact that they should and to make sure that the people planning and creating the content work together, collaborate, have that as part of their official job description, and really, always, holistically have the audience's need in mind as well as the organization's goals.

Jeff Cobb: [00:23:15] There are some difficult issues, I think, in content out there, particularly for our audience, which is typically in charge of creating educational programming, whether that's conferences or online courses or whatever it might be, and selling that content. It's supposed to be revenue-generating, but they may be competing against free content in many instances, even for all types of different formal course experiences and that sort of thing, all sorts of free options out there right now. They might have their own subject matter experts creating free content that's competing against them. And, of course, they also have to, if they're really demonstrating their value and doing what they need to to attract people to them, they probably need to be offering some things for free as well. So there's this balance, and there's a little bit of a tug of war between free content that's serving an educational purpose and more formal, paid content that's serving an educational purpose. I'm wondering how you think about the relationship there between free content and paid content and any tips you might offer to an organization that's struggling with that and trying to manage a portfolio that that might include both and might have competitors that are providing both options.

Hilary Marsh: [00:24:37] Yeah, I've seen that a lot, and it's a conversation I've been part of many, many times. And so I think that there's multiple ways to slice this. One is to really study what your competitors are doing and do sort of an apples-to-apples comparison where you can and then decide whether your balance should be more free because the benefit of free content is that it has great SEO juice. More people can find it; more people can use it. They might see the value. You might decide that you want to have one teaser or a few teaser pieces of free content and then have others like that or a limit, a *New York Times*, a typical newspaper subscription

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limit. If you're not a subscriber, you have a limit of how many things you can consume. I've seen plenty of associations, both my clients and others, do that approach. Some decide we're going to make one year's worth—the newest ones are paid, but the older ones are free. Or the newest ones are free, but the giant library is paid. So there's that. Another approach I've seen very often with not only educational content but content in general is that there's an approach called the bite, the snack, and the meal in terms of content creation, and that speaks to how people want to create content or how people want to consume content.

Hilary Marsh: [00:26:07] They want just the overview; they want the very basics, and that will help them decide whether to go further or not. And so, in terms of the physical “how we create content,” usually the headline in the summary is the bite. The snack might be the description of the PDF, but the whole long report is the meal, for example. And so the association might decide the bite's free, but the snack and the meal are paid. Or some other combination. So you might get the overview and the description for free, but, if you want to download the full thing, you have to be a member, or you have to pay us money. And one non-association organization I've seen use that approach a lot is Forrester Research. I can't speak to what they're doing now, most recently. Whether they've changed their business model or something, but it was a very common thing that they and the *Harvard Business Review* and other kinds of higher-end research-oriented organizations do. So that's another way to slice that.

Jeff Cobb: [00:27:14] That makes a ton of sense. I haven't heard that exact terminology before—bite, snack, meal—but that's a great way for listeners to be looking at the experiences that they're providing and figuring out how they might be able to partition it into that. I think most of the time we tend to start with the meal. We're going to we're going to create the whole meal. But, if you back up and say we've got all these ingredients that are going into the meal, and there might be courses to the meal, however you want to beat the metaphor to death I guess, but there are ways to think about your content so that you are again being strategic in how you're going about developing it.

Hilary Marsh: [00:27:51] Right. So if we dispense with the department idea and just think about the content, maybe the blog post is the bite, and the longer article in the magazine is something longer, and those are free because their goal is really to lead people to the full thing. So we have to think about content as a whole outside of the bounds of what the department is that created it. If we plan it together, conceive it together, then we can make those organization-wide decisions. Here's your part. Here's your part. Here's your part. And then here's the whole business model that those collectively add up to.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:28:33] That's great. That's such a strong argument for having the different stakeholders, constituents sitting at the table, probably not every day but at least periodically to really think through with that content strategist or whoever the person is that's facilitating that, so you're being coherent and, once again, strategic about how you're thinking about all of this.

Hilary Marsh: [00:28:53] One of the metaphors I have, which I think brings this home a little bit, is an orchestra. If an orchestra, if every musician and every section play their own piece of music at their own time in their own way, it would be cacophony. And yet if they come together and play the same piece of music together, the sound is far richer and deeper than it could have been with anyone alone. And a lot of times I feel like we are the former, and we need to be the latter. And the connector isn't the content strategist person. It's the content strategy. So whoever owns that strategy, however it's owned, that's what brings people together as that philosophical conductor.

Jeff Cobb: [00:29:47] I think that's a great metaphor. Cacophony is what it can feel like when you do have all those disconnected parts. We've been talking mainly from the producer standpoint. So that producer wants to have more of the orchestra, wants to tie everything together, make it harmonious, get rid of the cacophony. But then, of course, the reality is, on the consumer side, you're getting content from all over the place. It feels like a perpetual cacophony out there. I'd love your perspective for more of that consumer standpoint. And maybe referencing what you yourself do as a content expert, somebody who is a content strategist, how do you approach your own management and consumption of content, day in and day out, so that it isn't a cacophony, so that you're making sense, you're actually getting value out of the huge amount of content that's available to all of us now?

Hilary Marsh: [00:30:42] Yeah. I have a few things that I do. One is strategically unsubscribe. There's sometimes I interact with an organization, and after a time I feel like I've gotten what I needed. Either my interests have shifted, or I've learned what they have to share. So strategically unsubscribe. The other is, if I get information, and I actually get a lot of my learning through Twitter, through links that people share and learnings that people share, so I'm careful about who I follow, who I don't. And so what I do is there are notifications in Twitter, so I'll turn them on and turn them off. Sometimes I want them coming to me whenever the person puts something out. And sometimes I want to be in charge of when I go and seek out what does that person have to say. So that's another. And then I find I have a few pet peeves. For example, my biggest pet peeve is when I get an e-mail that says, "Did you see what we sent earlier?" And usually I unsubscribe, and I reply to that person and say, "Stop doing that because I've now just unsubscribed."

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Hilary Marsh: [00:31:55] Because I think that that's a tactic that is really not good. So I feel like, as a consumer, I have the power to decide what I get and what I don't get. And so I always wish for as many personalization options as I can get. And I worked on a project when I worked at the National Association of Realtors to consolidate our many, many, many e-mails and e-newsletters into a single, customizable weekly newsletter for members. And we found that it made a huge difference in the open rate because, once we stopped letting every department create their own newsletter and every program create their own and have their own schedule on their own calendar on their own thing—we were doing the cacophony—but once we put it together in a single newsletter that each person could customize to their own interests, then that became the orchestra to them because they owned the experience, and they owned what of our content they were getting on a weekly basis.

Celisa Steele: [00:33:07] Hilary Marsh is president and chief strategist at Content Company. You can find links to the Content Company site and her Twitter profile in the show notes for this episode at leadinglearning.com/episode330.

Jeff Cobb: [00:33:21] At leadinglearning.com/episode330, you'll also see options for subscribing to the podcast. We'd be grateful if you would subscribe if you haven't yet, as subscriptions give us some data on the impact of this particular part of our content strategy.

Celisa Steele: [00:33:36] We'd also be grateful if you would rate us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen, especially if you find the Leading Learning Podcast valuable. Jeff and I personally would appreciate it, and ratings and reviews help us show up when people search for content on leading a learning business. Go to leadinglearning.com/apple to leave a rating.

Jeff Cobb: [00:33:56] Lastly, please help us grow the Leading Learning community by letting others know about the good content we provide. At leadinglearning.com/episode330, there are links to find us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Celisa Steele: [00:34:09] Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

[music for this episode by DanoSongs, www.danosongs.com]

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