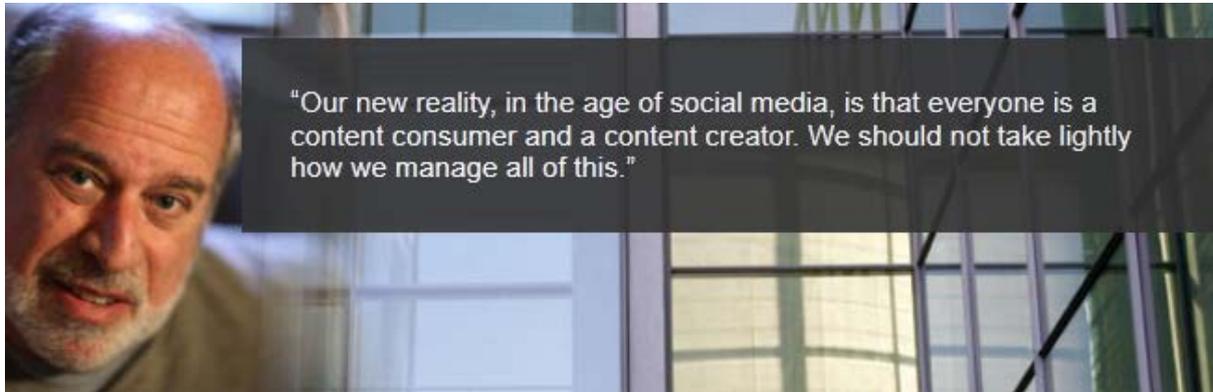


# End User- and SME-created Content - Good Strategy, but Risky (Mar 13)

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March 12, 2013



There's a huge push these days to move content development down the line to end users or over to subject matter experts (SMEs). Seems reasonable, right? After all, aren't end users closer to where the real work gets done, and who knows more than SMEs?

This would seem like a highly cost-effective move. Not so fast. Maybe it's a good idea, but it's not without big risks.

## The disaster factor

Just giving people some development tools and telling them to "go forth and create content" will, more than likely, result in chaos. If you are going to move content development out to the field, make sure you are doing it right. Here are 11 disastrous content failures to avoid.

## The content is inaccurate

Who says the end user or SME knows what he/she is talking about? Have you vetted them? Lots of people out there know a lot of stuff, but what they know is not always right. And if you let inaccurate content out, without review, people will follow it, perhaps to disastrous ends.

## The content is incomplete

This is not exactly the same as being inaccurate. Even though the content is right on, it's just not finished. Content consumers can get only so far, then stumble when they find out there is information that's missing. "Coming soon" is not a notice people in the field want to see when they need the information right now.

## The content is not authentic

Sometimes content is accurate and relevant, but not authentic. In other words, it just doesn't ring real or true for the content consumer. "Sure, it may be right," they would say, "but we don't do it this way in the 'real world.'" To avoid this, field-test your content with real users and/or customers, not just SMEs.

## The content is trivial

Is this information that people really need to know? For example, when learning about occupational health and safety, do you need to learn that Richard Nixon signed the original OSHA law (bet you didn't know that)? While there can be legitimate debate on whether content is "need to know" vs. "nice to know," watch out for content creeping in that's "completely unnecessary to know."

### **The content is redundant**

When the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing, you have waste. Before assigning a content development project, ask if someone has already done this or if someone currently is working on this. Collaboration on content development most often results in a better overall product.

### **There is conflicting information**

Sometimes one piece of content directly contradicts another. This is not necessarily a bad thing; when you find this, you have a great opportunity to correct and clarify, which does a great service to content integrity as a whole. Of course, if you just ignore the contradictions, well, let's just say that you wouldn't want to be around when two people try to do the same thing two different ways.

### **There is too much or too little content**

This is tricky, because while the content may be right for some users, it may be too much, too little, or too detailed for others. Think of a manager who just wants an overview of a new technology and gets everything there is. Or the technical professional who wants a deep dive, but all she or he can find is an overview. In such cases the content isn't bad; it's just frustratingly not useful.

### **The content has sourcing issues**

The more critical the content, the more important it is to be able to point to reliable sources for the information. This doesn't mean you have to exhaustively cite materials, but it does mean you should have adequate and accurate back up for what you are distributing. Plus, managing your sources well enables a much easier time when it comes to updating.

### **Introduction of bias**

Everyone has bias in some way, and sometimes a biased approach is valuable, especially when advocating for a position. But in most cases, the development of good content ought to reflect the needs and interests of the organizations and users, not just the perspective of content developers. Introducing development collaboration and peer review can mitigate the problems of individual bias.

### **Bad communication**

Sometimes people simply can't communicate. They can't write or put together a coherent presentation or they have trouble clearly articulating the content they are developing. Teaching experts to be better communicators may sometimes be too much of a hurdle. Initially screening for those who show some communication skill and savvy may be a better way to go.

### **Loss of control**

If everyone is developing content, how do you know who is doing what and how it all fits together? This can be a management nightmare. Ask yourself how much control you want of end user and SME developers. Too much and they may rebel or avoid this kind of work. Too little and you may experience many of the factors above, perhaps all at once! And it's not just managing the development process; you also have to consider archiving, distributing, and refreshing the content over the long term.

### **Keep it real**

Our new reality, in the age of social media, is that everyone is a content consumer *and* a content creator. We should not take lightly how we manage all of this. The knowledge explosion already overwhelms us; let's not make it worse by flooding our organizations with bad content.