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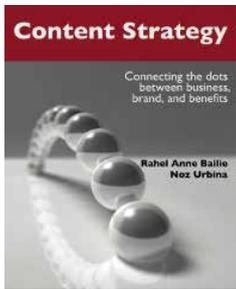How to write for scientific documentation

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Content Strategy. Connecting the dots between business, brand and benefits.

By Rahel Anne Bailie and Noz Urbina
XML Press (2013) First Edition, paperback, 306 pages, ISBN 978-1-937434-16-8. £24.34 Reviewed by **Andrew Peck**.

> "*This book is invaluable; it may also be a good idea to lend a copy to the project manager!*"

Rahel and Noz start with the disclaimer that this is not a '*how-to*' book. This is a little inaccurate and I would hate a reader to see this on a bookshelf and think that it's going to be theoretical, academic and distant, because while there may not be a detailed exploration of the tools used for '*doing*', this book leaves the reader equipped with most of the lines of persuasion and modelling techniques that they may need to champion content strategy within an organisation and lead change in a way that links content to wider strategic objectives.

Who is the audience?

This book is for those who understand content strategy and good communication but are struggling to make their voices heard over the shouts of the territorial authors, marketing gurus, graphics designers and others uninterested in change, who survive on generating a few words they can stick in poorly specified boxes. Rahel and Noz clearly set out with the objective of enabling others to make a strong case for joined-up content strategies in the organisations they serve, and with a well-structured and accessibly written text they have very much shown us the way out of the niche. I am of the school of thought that finds modelling a problem or issue a very useful step in working towards a solution and, therefore, I am inclined to find the arguments made in this book very useful because of the measured way in which they are presented.

Real experience

Their text is aided by real experiences and examples that the authors use to anchor and ground each chapter. However, unlike many other books that are designed to aid professional growth, the text does not fall into the trap of offering drawn-out office-centric fairy tales of '*he-said, she-said*'. Identifying key lessons, strategies and rationales is made easy by the overall presentation of the text. When planning projects and injecting content awareness and good communication into a process this book is invaluable; it may also be a good idea to lend a copy to the project manager!

Useful

Personally I have found this book '*useful*', perhaps the highest praise a technical communicator can give to a written document. I have already used some of the lessons learned to make a stronger case for technical communication and content strategy with potential clients, and the reception has been positive. It is this sense of empowerment and walking into meetings '*equipped*' that the book excels in delivering.

My favourite chapter comes late in the book and is titled 'Centering the Strategy Around a Content Lifecycle'. It sets out a content lifecycle that I feel is essential to remember when involved in content and communication and then frames it against various business drivers before discussing common stumbling blocks that a technical communicator/content strategist may face in the workplace and the arguments that can be used to overcome them. This includes lines of persuasion for reigning in graphics designers, and overcoming the ring-fence others may attempt to place around content types such as social media and user-generated content. It also draws our attention to aspects of content that we may sometimes overlook at our peril, such as metadata.

Content strategy is young

The authors continually point out that content strategy is a relatively young discipline and that more books, information and texts are on their way as the discipline matures. I feel confident that the much of what follows will be written by people who've read this book.

When a book so clearly states and then achieves its aims, it's difficult to find negatives to make in a review. It would be useful to see examples of content strategy being implemented in the infancy of a business or corporation, and an appendix containing a few longer case studies could be useful if ever a second edition is planned, but these are requests based on my own circumstances and the desire I have at the end of the book to see content strategy happening successfully. Having read the book I now know we missed out when Rahel couldn't make it to TCUK13; I'd certainly like to hear more.

Rating

I'm giving it 4 stars as a '*technical author*', however if you're selling and arguing for content services and can successfully communicate the content to the wider project team, you'll want to give it 5. **C**

Rating: ★★★★☆

About the authors:

Rahel Anne Bailie is the principal of Intentional Design Inc. in Canada. She is experienced in the areas of content development and user experience environments for international audiences.

Noz Urbina is now independent and founder of Urbina Consulting and Chairperson of Congility events. He has provided services to Fortune 500 organisations and small-to-medium enterprises as a content strategy and content management consultant.