



Mary Byers-Hilary Marsh podcast transcript

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Mary Byers

Hi I'm Mary Byers, and this is Successful Associations Today. My guest is Hilary Marsh, president and chief strategist of Content Company, a content and digital strategy consultancy that helps associations get better results from their content by improving their practices. She's been a leading voice for content strategy in the association world for many years. She is a coauthor of a major study about content strategy and associations for the ASAE Foundation, and the first-ever chapter about content strategy in the new edition of *Professional Practices in Association Management*. Hilary, I'm really looking forward to our conversation today -- thank you for being here.

Hilary Marsh

Thank you so much for having me. I really appreciate it.

Mary Byers

I was in your audience when you were talking about content several years ago and I was very impressed with your approach and how you explain content strategy, so let's start with that question: How do you define content strategy?

Hilary Marsh

Well, before we can talk about content strategy we have to talk for a minute about content, because I think people have a mistaken impression sometimes that content is only your magazine, or only your newsletters or only your blogs, and really, from my perspective, associations are kind of content machines. **Everything that an association does is content** -- events, the sessions you deliver orally, that is content, any kind of journals, clinical practice guidelines, advocacy position papers. Pretty much everything that the association does comes back to words and pictures and audio and video that you share with the world. So if we think about content in the way that associations produce it, if it were strategic it could be a little bit like an orchestra, where all the different sections and different musical instruments were playing the same music at the same time, and that's content strategy. But when it's not strategic, it comes off as noise and cacophony. A lot of times that's where associations find themselves. The official definition of content strategy -- and I've added a word in there -- is the practice of planning for the creation, delivery, and governance of content that's useful, usable and effective. "Effective" is the most recent term that I've added to that definition. So I know that's a long explanation, but I think it's important to start with the idea of what content even is.

Mary Byers

It almost sounds like this strategy is at a macro level at a higher level than all of the individual departments that we traditionally see in an association. Often when we think about associations we think about education and we think about networking and we think about advocacy, but what I hear you saying is this is the umbrella under which all of those things that create meaning or value for associations.

Hilary Marsh

Right. Members don't care, they shouldn't have to understand who's creating a specific piece of content in order in order to be able to find it and use it. And really at its heart, every department is engaged with that value that you just said. And ideally, folks will be talking to each other, to understand the areas of overlap and commonality, so that they're delivering all this content in a way that feels holistic to the audience.

Mary Byers

So where are associations missing the boat in regard to content strategy, then?

Hilary Marsh

So they're kind of siloed. And in fact, I had one association client who actually called their different departments "silos" and and I had to really resist chuckling, because I see silo as kind of a challenge to overcome, and they were fully embracing that that's what they do, which I thought was very interesting. But where they're missing the boat is that they're not starting with What does the audience need and want from us? What are the channels through which we can deliver it? And how do we make sure we're doing it best? These are straightforward and common sense questions, but it runs very counter to the idea of engaging volunteers, having volunteers do the important work of prioritizing, deciding, and then bringing it back to some holistic place after that, and instead it's done sort of in that siloed way, in my experience.

Mary Byers

What's the CEO's role in understanding and demanding content strategy for an association?

Hilary Marsh

Sometimes content strategy is really about budgeting. Every department that creates all these different programs works really hard to spend the money that they've been budgeted, set their own priorities, but then they get vertical, they get that heads down. So the CEO's job, in my opinion, is to bring it back and ask people to make those connections and ask people to work together, because it's not just a matter of budgeting, it's a matter of collaboration in the name of serving the member best, and serving the audience best -- because it's not always members, I certainly know that.

Mary Byers

I'm going to ask you to make a sweeping generalization here, so I'm putting you on the spot here a little bit. Do you believe, or is it your experience, that the majority of association CEOs really understand the value and importance of content strategy, or is this still an emerging field?

Hilary Marsh

So, I've worked with a good number [of CEOs] who actually do understand the value [of content strategy]. And they believe that they're charging their teams with making those connections, they're putting together cross-functional teams at that senior leadership level to do it. And I think sometimes the people at the senior leader level don't see that their teams aren't working in a way that they think they're working. I feel like it probably doesn't break down all the time at the CEO level, it doesn't even break down at that senior level, it breaks down at the middle level -- that's where it's hardest.

Mary Byers

I think you said really important here and that's the idea of cross functional. We talked about silos, and the way you get rid of silos is you build cross-functional teams and you make them part and parcel of the culture of the association. But when it comes to content strategy, I see the mistaken belief that that should belong solely to the marketing department or the communications department, because that's their job, when really it's everybody's job. So what are the obstacles that associations face in developing and deploying a solid content strategy?

Hilary Marsh

Well, the first one is that committee complexity. I used to work for a huge association that had 83 committees and subcommittees and forums, and to a large degree, the staff departments were accountable to one or a set of committees. So that is a huge part of the nexus of where those silos come from, because the committees themselves are siloed. I worked with one association that understood that and they put together essentially a cross functional committee. They called the content strategy effort Knowledge Integration, which I thought was a really interesting term, and they put together a Knowledge Integration Task Force. Before I even started they put together this task force of people hand-picked from different committees. That task force really had that aha moment that we as volunteers have to de-silo ourselves in order for the organization to be able to do that. Because you have that whole drive of course to be member-driven and not just staff-driven and there is that yin-yang in association. So that's huge. The other part is that one, they don't understand what content is and the breadth and scope of the fact that content is what they do. And the other one is a true understanding of who their audiences are and what those folks want from them, and the context in which those people live. So you and I already had interaction about this from the Indiana program that you led, where we talked about personas, and we had people in the room think about that, and I wrote a blog post for you about that. The idea of putting yourself in your audience's shoes I think is incredibly powerful and leads to insights that people have, but they don't know they have, if that makes any sense.

Mary Byers

And I think sometimes we have to be careful because our volunteer leaders are a very small subset of the whole population of members and where they are, they may be more advanced in their practices or their businesses. And so, just focusing on what they think members want can actually lead to an Achilles heel or a blind spot for us. So, the idea of personas and thinking about who we actually represent within the organization I think can be very powerful. But a related question here: How important is it for volunteer leaders -- for board members, for the executive committee, and for committee members -- to understand the whole idea of content strategy? If you are a staff that is trying to build a content strategy--first association -- if your leadership doesn't really understand what you're trying to do I think that could be a disconnect.

Hilary Marsh

Well, if you just explain it in simple terms that rather than being a series of silos, we are a multifaceted organization that exists to serve [members with] a set of programs and products, information, resources, tools -- all the things that the association does -- then it behooves us to do that in a concerted and conscious and strategic way. So bringing all those pieces together so that they really resonate will [help the organization succeed]. Because that's the challenge -- that is the single challenge that I see: people want to know, 'Gosh, the stuff we're producing is so good. How come more members don't use it?' And this is the way through that. This is the way to ensure that the work you're doing gets to the people who want it and need it, whether they sometimes know it and sometimes don't. So if we position it that way, who's gonna say no. It would be absolutely welcome.

Mary Byers

And isn't it true that it's not just what we're doing in terms of the content, but it's also how we organize it, how we make it available, how we distribute it and deploy it. Is that fair to say too?

Hilary Marsh

Sure. And it's also how we describe it. So sometimes the problem is that the people doing the work are amazing subject matter experts. So then I see emails like 'Act now on HR 432 B,' which makes perfect sense to the person in the advocacy group who lives and breathes this, but the audience does not. And so if your goal is to get them to act, you need to translate it for them. So it's not only where we put it, it's literally the content of how we talk about it.

Mary Byers

So this actually leads into another piece of this. Mixing content and digital strategy at first glance may not seem to be in alignment, but your company works on both of these areas. How are these two seemingly disparate focuses related?

Hilary Marsh

I have to say of all the questions that we agreed to chat about today, this was the one that gave me the biggest pause because to me they're interchangeable in a huge degree. Digital strategy --

not really just using different tools, or cooler tools or more modern tools -- is about the people and culture and understanding how our audience wants to consume our information. So when an association says to me, 'Well, does your content strategy work only talk about the web?' I explain to them that almost everything arrives online nowadays. Content is why people come to your association; delivering content digitally, in the most effective way, might mean making shorter videos because no one's going to watch your three-hour board meeting on video, or watch a 45-minute leadership, why to volunteer, video. So it's how we do it, but **it's also how we think about what does it mean to consume our content digitally, and what does it mean to consume our association, and interact digitally. So that's content in a huge, huge way.**

Mary Byers

Many associations actually grew their membership during the pandemic because they were leading with content, because members and non members were actively seeking sources of information and how-tos and what do we need to do, and what do we need to be thinking about next. So has the pandemic changed content strategy, and if so, how?

Hilary Marsh

I think that if anything, it might make associations more open to working [differently]. And I think that that's had good results, for the most part.

Mary Byers

So it's an acceleration, then. I think that is true in general -- the pandemic has accelerated trends that we had already seen in play before, but they've also provided a tailwind, because now we've seen what's possible and now we've had time to innovate and we've had time to adequately resource and we've had time to have different conversations than we might have otherwise.

Hilary Marsh

I wrote a white paper on content curation, which is a huge related piece of this, and gave a talk at ASAE's Membership, Marketing and Communications conference during the pandemic about content reuse. So, we produce a big paper, but how can we make more of it, or we're sharing industry news, but we need to add our own information. **Everybody has Google so they don't need what the government agency says -- what they need is, is your association's unique analysis over that.** And this gets to another point that I haven't raised yet, which is that **to some degree it's about making sure that people's job descriptions include these different responsibilities, because people are going to resist change if their job isn't based on that.** No one's got time to do a whole other part-time job in addition to what they're charged with. So if content responsibilities at least in some form, whether it's partnering with a content expert or learning Facebook or whatever it might be or participating in the conversations about what should be prioritized on the homepage or the e-newsletter, that needs to be part of their job description, it needs to be what their manager, their boss measures them on to some degree in order for them to do it.

Mary Byers

That's an excellent point. I think too many people try to dump this into somebody else's job description again. Marketing and communications, because there there seems to be a natural connection there. You mentioned, and these are some phrases that I think association professionals should be thinking about -- really, I think some of the value for associations going forward is in being sense makers and wayfinders and it's exactly what you said. Anybody can google and find out what the government agency says, but those who were the association can bring value is to ask the question, 'And what does that mean for us?'

Hilary Marsh

And that analysis, that context is how you go from simply being a gatekeeper into truly adding value that no one else can offer because it's unbiased, it's well researched, it's super smart and very aware of the members' context that they need to know about it.

Mary Byers

And that's exactly as you said earlier, where the subject matter experts come in. We have that, it's just harnessing that and helping connect the dots between what what we know and then what we need to know, going forward. What were some of the major learnings of the ASAE foundation content strategy study? I know we could do a whole podcast on that. But what can we learn from that?

Hilary Marsh

[There are a] couple things I wanted to say. One is the first thing we had to figure out is how do help associations answer the question, Are you doing content strategy? Because that means so many things to different people in different ways. I worked with Dina Lewis and Carrie Hane, two other people who I've worked with a long time who are experts in the field. We put our heads together and and grow content strategy down into 18 different tactics.

Mary Byers

Wow

Hilary Marsh

Everything from content audits to social media to [content] governance. Do you have this? Are you doing it? Are you doing it across or is it just one department? We identified the parts and pieces that constitute content strategy. And then we looked at whether there were patterns in the associations that were doing it a little bit or not at all and those who were adopting more of the standards. And we really found that there's a difference. So the findings were, 1, that associations of all different kinds and types are doing content strategy at least a little, which is reassuring actually and exciting. And I think especially between the study and the chapter, the Professional Practices of Association Management chapter, more and more associations will become aware of it and they'll start adopting it. But we saw kind of a movement in the maturity

scale -- basically, I would say if I have to sum it up from either one-off or little or isolated efforts to this managed, holistic association-wide practice at the advanced level. So of course not that many associations are there yet, but I really am excited about the possibility of more associations growing in their maturity. And I think that the chapter will help, and I think our results will help. So it's not only that there's theory out there, but seeing the results of creating your content different differently and delivering it in a more holistic way will prove successful.

Mary Byers

I think just being able to name the parts and pieces of content strategy, making it tangible in that way is helpful. What are some of the simple ways that association -- those that didn't fall into the advanced category. What are some simple ways they can start to harness the power of a planned content strategy?

Hilary Marsh

I have three suggestions. One is a shared content calendar to record all the content that each department is planning to create, so that the people in the magazine can say 'Oh we're doing an article about that.' And the same topic that we're going to be talking about it at the conference, and the same position papers that the advocacy group is working on. Seeing those areas of commonality will save time, because then nobody needs to be the official describer of the issue -- we only need to do that once, and we only should do that once, and then everybody can run with it in the medium and direction that they need to go in. And so then we can just map out the year and have a better understanding. Related to that is talk to each other, because everybody gets so busy and heads-down in their own work -- it sounds so simple but it isn't. They forget to talk to each other. And the other piece is to audit the content you have, to understand and be really honest, what is working and not working. So if we see a piece of content that's gotten -- especially in a large association -- 15 unique pageviews over a one-year period. that's the members voting with their feet. If there's 10,000 members and 15 people have viewed it, it's not important to them compared to the other things that are important to them. So we might give thought to how can we fix that, or we might give thought to [whether] that topic just not top of mind for people, is that format not resonating for them -- why did they only get so little? So asking questions, doing that audit, asking ourselves questions, and again being honest about it.

Mary Byers

Excellent, excellent advice. The whole piece about talking to each other has become a little more challenging, as we are in an era of remote work right now and we don't have those fortuitous interactions that would happen when we passed in the hallway or I can't go down the hall and just stick my head in somebody's office and say 'Hey do you have a quick second to talk about this?' So we have to be more intentional and deliberate about our work. I think that's where some of the challenge has come in over the past year. But certainly as we emerge through this and as we return to the office, I think this is a great opportunity for us to either double down, if we're advanced on the content arena, or to be more intentional and deliberate

as we think about what this means for us going forward. So as we wrap up here from your perspective, what's the most important takeaway for our listeners today?

Hilary Marsh

I actually have three. One is, **make sure that every piece of content you publish has a clear, explicit audience and a measurable goal, because if it doesn't, how will we know if it's successful**, and we want to make sure that we're understanding the content that works, and making [better decisions about it]. Two is that **your committees are not your audience**, as we've talked about. In fact, I think committees could be a tremendous help being ambassadors to their peers and colleagues who aren't volunteering. So I think there are creative ways to take advantage of volunteers' effort and interest in participating. The third is the whole job thing that we talked about a minute ago, and **making sure that if content responsibilities really are baked in people's job, that it has to be official and not something that they're supposed to do in their spare time, and if it's a partnership between subject matter experts and folks in marketing and communications, which is where the content experts typically fall, then there has to be time and room for that -- it has to be acknowledged as an official thing.**

Mary Byers

Thank you so much Hilary. Where can people reach you if they want to learn more about this or content strategy in general?

Hilary Marsh

Well, my website which is always under construction and always evolving, is contentcompany.biz, and my email is just my name, Hilary, at contentcompany.biz.

Mary Byers

Well and you always should be evolving -- as the content strategy maven, you certainly can't afford to rest on your laurels. Not that you would. So thank you so much for being here today. I'm Mary Byers, and this is Successful Associations Today.