The Four Content Operating Models

An opportunity to assess, orient, and balance your content strategy to be able to create optimized content-driven customer experiences at scale.

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CONTENTS

01 WHY: THE OPERATING MODELS OF CONTENT
An introduction to the operating models for an intelligent content strategy, and our rationale for why balancing them is so important.

02 WHAT: THE SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOL
A self-assessment tool that you can apply to understand how well your organization is currently balanced to deliver customer experiences at scale.

03 HOW: ASSESSING THE RESULTS AND TAKING NEXT STEPS
Evaluating your results, and understanding what the next steps should be.
INTRODUCTION: WHY WE CARE ABOUT THE OPERATING MODELS OF CONTENT

So, what is a content operating model? And, perhaps even more importantly, why should we care? We might be saying to ourselves, "we've got so many demands and so much content to produce, why take the time to plan? Let's just get to it!"

DON'T SHIP THE ORG CHART!
Well, as it turns out Steven Sinofsky has the answer. Steven is a product marketing guru and the former President of the Windows Division at Microsoft. He is most famous for saying "Don't ship the org chart."

It's great advice. Make sure that what you're offering - whether it's software like Windows, a device like a phone, or something less tangible, like content and customer experiences - is built to satisfy the customer needs and desires instead of reflecting your internal organizational structure, your silos, your turf battles, your budget constraints. It just makes sense.

*Don't let your communications reflect how you operate.*

But as it turns out, when Sinofsky says don't ship the org chart, he doesn't mean that you shouldn't ship the org chart. In fact, he means almost precisely the opposite. "Don't ship the org chart," isn't a warning about something you should strive to avoid. It's rather a statement of fact about something that is, well, *unavoidable.*
You WILL ship the org chart.

It is inevitable, it’s inescapable, it’s preordained. It’s like a natural law.

And in fact, Sinofsky was deliberately invoking what’s called Conway’s Law. Dr. Melvin Conway was a computer scientist and developer. In 1968 he noted that “organizations that design systems...are constrained to produce designs which are copies of the communication structures of these organizations.” This can be neatly summarized as:

"Organizational design IS product design."

As marketers, our products are content and communications. And what Sinofsky and Conway teach us is that since we are inevitably going to communicate in the way that we are organized:

**We better make sure that we are organized and operate in the way that we want to communicate to customers.**

Our experience with this organizational constraint is summed up in what we might call the TCA Communication Razor:

How well a business **communicates** is in **direct correlation** with how much importance it puts on the **strategy of content**.
THE FOUR OPERATING MODELS OF CONTENT
Whenever we see content strategy succeeding, it’s typically happening in one or more of four content operating models along two axes. On the left axis, we see models that are internally focused versus more externally focused, building audiences that can be monetized over time. Then, along the bottom axis we see models that are departmental (e.g. siloed) services shading into integrated business services.

The quick and easy way to explain and distinguish the models is to look at the output they typically produce. We begin in the lower left with The Player model. This is certainly the most common. This is often two or three people - although it can be many more - that are tasked with fulfilling the needs of the business by creating, producing, and merchandising content. This team creates infographics, eBooks, sales sheets, populates the blog on the website and often creates presentations for the CEO. This team is the "creator of assets."

Then, The Processor model in the lower right is content-as-a-service. This is again internally focused, but is leaning toward a more integrated business service that the whole enterprise uses. Maybe you’ve got a team or teams working on SEO strategy or perhaps
localization, scalability, best practices guidelines, protocols etc. They’re setting the standards for how content will be created and managed, whether in the organization or by outsourced agencies.

Then, as we move up to the upper left, we have The Performer model. Here the focus is on building external audiences. There may be an editorial team managing a resource center or a dedicated blog or a magazine or video channel - discrete, immersive experiences aimed at nurturing audiences.

Then, finally, in the upper right, we have The Platform model. This model is content-as-a-business, where content is not only being created as a marketing and sales tactic, but maybe even as an integrated product or business strategy.

The Platform model may even have a revenue stream associated with it.

**NOT A MATURITY MODEL**

Now, it’s very tempting to look at the four models across a maturity scale, where you start with baby steps as a Player and grow up to become a Platform content business. While this has some element of truth (e.g. you almost always start out in the Player model and aspire to Platform), it’s misleading to see these as stages.

Every successful content operation is a balanced combination of all four models. So it’s not a question of which one are we now and how do we grow as quickly as possible. Rather an Intelligent Content Strategy is about which balance of the four makes sense both today and tomorrow.

**EXAMPLE: A PUBLISHING FOCUSED MODEL**

*Publishing Product Focus*

Manage portfolio of media assets, but much of that merchandised content, comes from the editorial strategy of the content marketing platforms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Publishing Model</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Performer Model</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Platform Model</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Player Model</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processor Model</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Examples**

- Symantec
- Capital Group
TAKE THE SELF ASSESSMENT

We have identified four types of content operating models: Performer, Platform, Player, and Processor. You can think of each model as a functional approach to content strategy and how your business operates.

The challenge is to balance the appropriate mix of content models with the needs of the business and the available resources. Too often, we see businesses struggle with scaling and measuring content because the operating models are out of balance.

This self-assessment tool is a high level tool that can help identify the three most common imbalances, with suggestions for steps you can take to address the challenges they pose.
INSTRUCTIONS
Review the four operating models below and assess your organization’s status for each model across three criteria. Even if you do not have a role in managing or executing in a particular area, rank according to your best estimate of how well the business currently manages this activity. It is very useful to have several members of the content team complete the assessment and then compare results - wide variance can indicate lack of consensus and misunderstandings that should be addressed. Conversely, completing the assessment as a group is not advised, as it can conceal these kinds of internal disagreements.

A - Maturity
In the first column, please rank your organization’s maturity level, on a scale of 1 to 5 as follows:

1. We do not have this at all, or are not organized or successful at it.
2. We do this, and are not good at it, or the team that handles it is new or does not manage it to the level we need.
3. Our business does this - and we do the best we can. We are moderately successful.
4. Our business is relatively successful at this, and we are able to demonstrably show results related to the activities here.
5. We are differentiated at this activity. We should be a case study on how this operating model should work.

B - Effort
In the second column, calculate the percentage of effort (time/budget/resources) that the team spends on delivering this content operating model to the business. Percentages across the four operating models should equal 100%.

C - Future Need
In the third column, rank your team’s future need (or desire) to develop this as a core strength of your strategic approach to content, on a scale of 1-5, as follows:

1. We are not moving in this direction, or are already doing it as best as can be done.
2. This is not a primary focus. We have made an active decision to NOT move this way.
3. We have been looking to expand this model and are generally happy with our progress, but are looking to incrementally improve here.
4. We have been thinking strategically about moving in this direction, and are building a business case for it.
5. This is a critical focus for us. We are actively driving investment to develop this.
HOW DID YOU DO?

In evaluating your results, first look for variations and disagreements internally among those who have completed the assessment. For example, if the editorial board thinks your content operations team should be spending 25% of the effort on The Processor model tasks, but they are in fact consuming 40% of your time, then priorities or resources need to be evaluated and realigned.

Second, look for any of the three common imbalances outlined below. (Note that high scores are 4-5; low scores are 1-2. High effort is 50% or more; low effort is 20% or less).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Low Maturity / Low Effort / High Need</strong></th>
<th><strong>Low Maturity / High Effort / Low Need</strong></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>These types of scores are almost always due to a completely new strategy and/or mandate for the business. New strategic efforts such as a Global Content Strategy or a more focused effort on new channels may be identified as highly desirable, but the organization as yet lacks the skills or resources to handle it. However this can also be the &quot;wishful thinking&quot; balance, where the team is trying to build a business case to do something desirable, but has been unable to collectively assemble the right kind of case for the resources and/or communications to tackle it successfully.</td>
<td>These types of scores may be most common when the content team is on a learning curve for a relatively young effort. You may have a Low Maturity score, a High Effort and Low Need because you’re already trying to do it. However, this combination can also indicate an undesirable situation where you are putting a large effort into something that the business doesn’t value very much, or is valuable to only one constituency. The key question to ask here is, what are the other models that we want to support, and are we neglecting them by putting too much effort into one particular model.</td>
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**Immediate Action**
Review your team’s existing resources and capabilities to handle the high-need operation. The immediate inclination is to use the business case to outsource elements of this new model. Resist that urge until you discover how you might ultimately balance the models to address the need and make it a core competency. Reflect and review the team’s core skills and competencies. Review your resources. Are you spending your time and skills in the right place. Are you scaling effectively? |

**Possible Common Challenges**
- Talent / skills misalignment
- New tech and/or infrastructure need
- Integration with business units
- Imbalanced resources
- Misaligned expectations from the business
High Maturity / High Effort / Low Need

This is the most common result when things are working well and in a balanced fashion across an operating model. Taken individually the team may have matured in any one or multiple models, balanced the efforts, and do not seek to expand into any other models. When balanced across all four models this result is the heart of an Intelligent Content Strategy.

However, if only one of the models has this kind of score, then you need to review the sources and impacts of imbalances with other models as well as the performance of this specific model. While the review may suggest rebalancing resources among models, a High Maturity/High Effort/Low Need result could indicate that a high-performing team has become siloed to the detriment of other areas.

Immediate Action
Review your other scores and ask if the high performing model is (or is at risk of becoming) a silo. Also look to how specialized this model is as an overall business strategy and see where the next opportunities to expand may be.

Possible Challenges
- Siloed team
- Unaddresssed ability to scale

THE BALANCE IS WHAT MATTERS

Overall, these three imbalances can mean other things as well. The real key of the self-assessment is to have a clear-eyed view of where you and your team, and ultimately your business are spending the investment in content.

Arguably all four models need to be represented at balanced levels - and if you were to draw the perfect model for your business, there’s a very high likelihood that you would rebalance your efforts at least slightly differently.

Each of the models have different workflows, resource needs, measurement structures and methods to scale. This is the real benefit of understanding the balance. Remember, you can’t stop "shipping the org chart." You have to design an org chart that you want to ship.
ABOUT TCA: THE CONTENT ADVISORY
We are a content-obsessed research, consulting, and advisory company. Our goal is to blend the art and science of intelligent content strategy, to help today’s modern business communicators scale and measure their efforts.

Mastering an intelligent content strategy is not simply a creative, governance, or technological shift. It is both emotional and logical. It requires creativity and data. An intelligent content strategy evolves the way business teams create, collaborate, and collect insight on every communication.

We are TCA: The Content Advisory. We can help you balance your content strategy.

LET’S CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

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ON YOUR CONTENT OPERATING MODEL

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