Clout: The Art and Science of Influential Web Content

Colleen Jones
To Chris for motivating me to think and do better

To Mom and Dad for their ardent support

In memory of my brother, Parker, the jester
FOREWORD

The web is all about action verbs. We click. We search. We navigate. We make choices. Alone among other forms of media, we’re the ones who control our experience.

When organizations try to connect with their customers online, one of the first things they always want to know is “how can we get our users to do what we want them to?”

There’s an answer to this question, but it requires a change in mindset. Marketers typically want to build awareness for their products, and they try to replicate this broadcast approach on the web. They create static designs that recall print ads, flashy microsites that replicate TV commercials, and email blasts that resemble nothing so much as a street-corner Barker, yelling loudly while he tries to press a flyer into your hand.

And then they wonder why users don’t do what they want them to.

Organizations that want to connect with users online need to shift their approach from gaining awareness to building influence. Persuading people to behave differently means understanding how to inspire people, motivate them, and gain their trust.

The user experience field might rightfully say: “Influencing user behavior? Why, that’s what we do!” And it’s true—if you’re looking for techniques to prod people into behaving a certain way, your friendly user experience designer can help you. They’ll tell you that the way to get users to do what you want them to do is to design a sexier landing page, chunk pages so they flow better, and create an eye-catching call to action. Not working well enough? Just A/B test different options until you find the optimal design.

We’ve lost our influence with users because our obsession with the medium means we’ve lost our focus on what really matters — the message. We’re so focused on form that we’ve forgotten about substance. It’s time to bring attention back to what we want to say, not just how and where we want to say it.

Well, guess what? Long before there even was a web, we knew how to communicate our messages by tailoring them to the needs and expectations of an audience. We knew how to persuade people by appealing to logic or emotion. We knew the art of rhetoric.
Now, “rhetoric” might seem like the province of glad-handing politicians and oily salesmen, bombastic orators trying to convince naive rubes to part with their hard-earned cash. If that’s what you’re imagining, let me assure you: Colleen Jones is the exact opposite of that stereotype. With clear reasoning and straightforward prose, she’ll make the art and science of persuasion accessible to everyone.

In this book, Leen provides a solid framework for thinking about how to influence people’s attitudes, behaviors, and decisions online. She draws on decades of research in rhetoric and technical communication, outlining a few key principles that can help any organization be more persuasive on the web.

This book will offer practical advice to anyone who wants to influence behavior or decision-making using the web. But don’t expect to find just tips and tricks—Leen offers a holistic approach to content strategy that will tie all your communication efforts together, including your website, social media, search, and even customer service.

Wondering how to get your users to do what you want them to? You need Clout.

—Karen McGrane, Managing Partner, Bond Art + Science

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thought writing a book would be hard. I was wrong. Writing a book is very hard. Clout wouldn’t be in your hands without the help of these outstanding people.

I can’t thank Michael Nolan, Jeff Riley, and the delightful team at New Riders enough for their wisdom, talent, and collaboration.

Many thanks to the 130+ people in the content strategy and user experience communities around the world who responded to my survey about Clout. Your thoughts helped shape its direction.

Kristina Halvorson tore down barriers to more and better discussion about web content, inspired me to contribute, and shared her smart advice. Thank you!

Karen McGrane eloquently discusses all aspects of user experience. And, she demonstrates how a technical communication background
(also my background) can lead to executive vision. I’m honored that Clout begins with her foreword.

I owe special thanks to these thought leaders for contributing quotes, examples, or case studies:

- Conal Byrne and Tracy V. Wilson, HowStuffWorks.com
- David Almacy, Edelman
- John Muehlbauer, InterContinental Hotels Group
- Bert DuMars and Susan Wassel, Newell Rubbermaid
- Kelly Holton, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- Jonathan Kay, Grasshopper.com
- Jim Coudal, The Deck
- Erin Pettigrew, Gawker Media
- Alan Segal, Cox Media Group
- Scott Thomas, Simple Scott and BarackObama.org
- Alan Beychok and Trish Tobin, FootSmart.com
- Tim Jones, North Carolina State University

I’m also grateful to Jeffrey MacIntyre, Rachel Lovinger, BJ Fogg, Jeffrey Zeldman, Erin Kissane, Jeff Chasin, Robert Krause, Shelly Bowen, Rahel Bailie, Sally Bagshaw, Dechay Watts, and Debbie Williams for contributing their insights, connections, or examples.

And I thank Carolyn Wood of A List Apart for nudging me to write “Words That Zing,” which laid groundwork for this book. I also thank Pabini Gabriel-Petit of UXmatters for supporting my past column about content.

I’m indebted to Toni Pashley for holding me accountable. (Margaritas are motivating!) And thanks to Margot Bloomstein, Jonathan Kahn, Destry Wion, Kevin O’Connor, Mike Schinkel, Jeff Hilimire, Chris Moritz, and David Forbes for their enthusiasm early on.

Finally, I extend a heartfelt thanks to Kim Ware for her assistance with editing as well as creating and managing the hundreds of figures. Thanks also to Laura Nolte for helping me spread the news about this book.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Colleen Jones has led interactive strategy for Fortune 500 companies such as InterContinental Hotels Group and Cingular Wireless (now AT&T) as well as for Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the most trusted government agency in the United States. As the principal of Content Science, Colleen consults with executives and practitioners about making their web content more influential. Colleen is a veteran of the interactive industry, a participant in the first ever Content Strategy Consortium, and the founder of Atlanta Content Strategy. She has spoken about the value of compelling web content at conferences everywhere from Phoenix to Paris. Please send her any feedback at colleen@content-science.com.
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CONGRATULATIONS FOR TAKING a big step toward better web content. I’m thrilled to be your guide on a journey to make your content influence results. But, first, let me orient you.

HOW DID CLOUT COME ABOUT?

This book is a labor of love—my love for content strategy, persuasion, and positive change. Because people use the web now more than ever to make decisions, everyone from big brands to small businesses to individuals has the opportunity to influence those decisions. My goal is to help you make the most of that opportunity.

I also intend this book to solve problems I see again and again in the interactive industry, such as

- Targeting customers with manipulative tricks.
- Publishing more instead of better web content.
- Spending too much time and money on search engine optimization (SEO) snake oil or misguided advertising.
- Getting on social networks without any thought about supporting content.
- Publishing content that doesn’t get results.
WHY PRINCIPLES?

Most of this book explains principles of influence from rhetoric and psychology. Why not start with tactics instead? The reason is simple: **Learning and practicing principles is quicker in the long run.**

Understanding these principles takes time up front, but then you can apply them to any business or project. That’s much faster than throwing a bunch of tactics out on the web and inferring why they worked (or, more likely, why they *didn’t* work). As Ralph Waldo Emerson has said,

> “The man who grasps principles can successfully select his own methods. The man who tries methods, ignoring principles, is sure to have trouble.”

I want you to have success, not trouble.

WHO SHOULD READ CLOUT—AND HOW?

While anyone on the web can benefit from this book, I’ve written it with these audiences in mind.

CONTENT, CREATIVE, AND BRAND STRATEGISTS

You love web content and plan for it strategically. Here’s how to use this book:

- Make the case for spending time and money on content with familiar and not-so-familiar arguments in chapters 1 and 2.
- Learn the art and science of influence in chapters 3 through 5.
- Jump-start your planning with chapters 6 and 7.
- Evaluate your content efforts with the help of chapters 8–10.
- Consider the call to our industry in chapter 11.
EXECUTIVES
You have a 10,000-foot view of what’s happening with your business on the web. Here’s how to use this book:

- Read chapters 1, 2, and 11 to understand why influential content is *mission critical*.
- If your industry is health, learn why content is a huge opportunity for you in chapter 11.
- Scan the rest for
  - Insight into the time and effort needed to plan and evaluate influential content.
  - Examples and case studies from big brands such as IHG, CDC, Rubbermaid, Sharpie, HowStuffWorks.com, and more.

WEB WRITERS AND CONTENT CREATORS
You love crafting quality content, whether it’s words, photos, podcasts, music, or video. Here’s how to use this book:

- Get inspiration for content ideas in chapters 3 through 5.
- Plan content using patterns of influence in chapter 6.
- Gain insight into evaluating content from chapters 8–10.

INTERACTIVE MARKETERS AND PR SPECIALISTS
You’re finding more and more that content makes or breaks your campaigns. And, beyond campaigns, you now have to plan for *entire customer relationships*. Here’s how to use this book:

- Make the case for spending time and money on content with chapters 1 and 2.
- Learn the art and science of influence in chapters 3 through 5.
- Jump-start your planning with chapters 6 and 7.
- Learn the value of qualitative evaluation from chapters 8–10.
- Consider the call to improve the interactive industry in chapter 11.
SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS

For many of you, the web is your biggest—sometimes only—presence in the world. You know it's important, but you get conflicting advice about what to do. Here's how to use this book:

- Learn why influential content is a valuable investment from chapters 1 and 2.
- Get inspiration for content ideas in chapters 3 through 5.
- Plan content with chapters 6 and 7, then get help with evaluating in chapters 8–10.

NONPROFITS AND PEOPLE WHO DO GOOD

You're realizing the power of the web to move your cause forward. Here's how to use this book:

- Make the case for funding content with chapters 1 and 2.
- Learn the art and science of influence in chapters 3 through 5.
- Plan content with help from chapters 6 and 7.
- Evaluate your content efforts with the help of chapters 8–10.

With first things covered, you're ready to start the journey toward clout.
The ancient Greeks knew more than how to wear a toga. They introduced principles of rhetoric, such as persuasive appeals, identification, repetition, and seizing the opportune moment. These principles will help your web content influence results.

...PERSUASION HAPPENS TO BE NOT A SCIENCE, BUT AN ART.

—William Bernbach, advertising mogul
Despite its practical value, rhetoric is a lost art. We don’t get to learn it in school, especially in the United States. Even worse, rhetoric is sometimes mistaken for a dark art. Politicians abuse it by making empty promises. Let’s move forward by looking back at what the ancient Greeks (and other smart rhetoricians) actually had in mind.

WHAT RHETORIC REALLY IS

The philosopher Aristotle defined rhetoric as figuring out the best way to persuade in a situation.1 Today, Andrea Lunsford, a respected professor at Stanford University, defines rhetoric as “the art, practice, and study of human communication.”2

Over thousands of years, smart scholars and practitioners have debated the theory and scope of rhetoric.3 I’ve distilled many of the useful ideas from that debate into four principles for web content.

1. THE TRIED-AND-TRUE APPEALS

What’s the number one principle of rhetoric? Aristotle would say it’s not one but three—the persuasive appeals. He introduced them in Rhetoric as ethos (credibility), logos (logic), and pathos (emotion). This trio has shaped notions of persuasion ever since.

Aristotle insisted on always combining these appeals. In that spirit, I include them together in this first (and longest) principle of rhetoric.

A. Credibility

It’s why people should trust and listen to you or your organization. Typical points of credibility include

- **Experience:** You have a lot of it, or your experience is specialized.
- **Success:** You’ve achieved something important or are having success now.
- **Reputation:** People in the community know you as having a certain characteristic, expertise, or offering.
- **Endorsement/Association:** A credible brand or person says you are credible or connects with you in a credible way.
- **Certification:** You have earned a certain security or achievement level.
- **Longevity**: You’ve been around for a while.
- **Similarity**: You have a lot in common with the users. (I’ll discuss this more in principle 2, Irresistible Identification.)

**Use Credibility at the Right Time**
The less people know about you, the more you need to prove your credibility. When you’re established, sometimes you need to prove that your credibility is still relevant. The trick is to convey your credibility without making people yawn.

**Apply Credibility to Content**
Much has changed since ancient Greek times. We communicate largely through digital content. So, let’s look at how that content can show your credibility.

**Quality Content Over Time**
You’ll build a reputation as a trusted resource if you publish consistently good content over time. It’s like being the person who always says something useful. What’s even better? Becoming known for a particular approach to content. Mashable, for example, built its name in the interactive design community for offering handy lists (Figure 4.1).

![Figure 4.1: Mashable built credibility on its signature list content.](image-url)
Reviews, Awards, and Other Kudos
Focus on useful praise from sources your users know and value. For instance, the household products retailer Alice.com earned features from trusted media such as Good Housekeeping and CNN (Figure 4.2).

Quotes
Pick quotes from people your users respect and can relate to. Alice rotates quotes from actual customers that describe how the service helped them save time, money, and stress (Figure 4.2).

Partner or Advertising Affiliations
If your website has advertising, your advertisers reflect on your credibility. The design trade journal A List Apart, for example, includes only select advertisers who are respected in the design community (Figure 4.3).

Figure 4.2: Pertinent awards and quotes greet customers at Alice.

Figure 4.3: A List Apart features quality advertisers such as Parsons: The New School for Design.
If you’re not a media property, business partnerships or alliances serve a similar purpose.

**Expert Contributions**

If a respected expert contributes content to your website, you gain credibility. In turn, if you’re invited to be the expert contributor, you gain credibility. American Express Open Forum, a knowledge center for small businesses, offers content from experts at Mashable and Small Business Trends (Figure 4.4).

**Curated Content from Credible Sources**

Curating content is showcasing good content in a unique way. When you curate content from credible sources, you enhance your own credibility. The Brain Traffic Twitter feed, for example, highlights work by content strategists around the world and commentary from industry publications (Figure 4.5).
References

When you ground your facts with references, you not only ensure you’re telling the truth but also align with credible sources (Figure 4.6).

Keep in mind that some of these warning signs can happen with other conditions that are not cancer.

If you have any signs that worry you, be sure to see your doctor right away.

Reference


Related Link

- Understanding Breast Changes: A Health Guide for Women (NCE)

Brand, Organization, or Product History

Sometimes, your organization or product has a rich and relevant history. The original Mini Cooper, for example, was designed to offer less expensive and more efficient transportation in the 1960s. Mini Cooper’s website makes that story pertinent to today’s environmental concerns (Figure 4.7).
Security and Privacy Cues
When you ask people to share personal information, you need to show that your website is safe. Grasshopper.com shows security logos and a brief explanation of privacy on its registration form (Figure 4.8).

![Figure 4.8: Grasshopper shows its safety certifications.](image)

CREDIBILITY WORK IS BEHIND THE SCENES
Lots of the content for credibility demands background work. You or your organization have to ask, apply for, or earn much of this content.

B. Logic
It's whether your argument or reasoning is formed well (also known as being valid). At a minimum, good reasoning comprises these key elements:4

- **Claim:** It's what you assert to be true, such as a value proposition.
- **Evidence:** It's what supports your claim, such as facts, statistics, and testimonials.
- **Warrant:** It's why you can make the claim based on the evidence. Sometimes, the warrant is implied because it is an assumption (or set of assumptions).
Pulse Check: Website Credibility Research

When the web first became used commercially, some studies explored how people assess the credibility of a website. *Consumer Reports* sponsored perhaps the most influential study in 2002. Based on that study, *Consumer Reports* developed the following web credibility guidelines: 5

- **Identity**: Say who you are and where you are located.
- **Advertising and Sponsorships**: Clearly distinguish between content that is advertised or sponsored and content that isn’t.
- **Customer Service**: Inform people of any fees, return policies, and other information important to making shopping decisions.
- **Corrections**: Correct false, misleading, or outdated content and have a policy if someone makes a purchase using incorrect content.

These guidelines are sensible. But, almost ten years have passed. Websites are a lot different. Social networking and mobile access are on the scene. More people are using more websites more often for everything from banking to managing health records. As a result, have people’s expectations changed? Has the way people evaluate website credibility evolved? I’d love to find out.

To do our part, Content Science is organizing a study and plans to report its results in 2011 at www.content-science.com.

Your argument generally is good if

- Your claim likely is true when your evidence is true.
- Users can understand the warrant quickly.

As a simple example, REI claims it is the first U.S.-based travel company to become 100 percent carbon neutral. The evidence is REI’s policy of buying credits to support renewable energy (such as solar and wind). The warrant is that the renewable energy work neutralizes carbon emissions, so buying those credits compensates for REI’s emissions.
Make Sense to Your Users

Even if you form solid logic, users make or break it. Users must accept your evidence as good evidence. For example, REI emphasizes that it buys energy credits from the respected Bonneville Environmental Foundation. Users also must share enough in common with you to understand the assumptions. In the case of REI, REI customers tend to care about the environment, and people who care about the environment likely are familiar with carbon credits.

Often, the more you ask of people’s time or money, the more evidence you’ll need to offer. Many people spend more time researching to buy a car than they do to buy driving gloves, for instance. That’s why AutoTrader.com offers not only car advertisements but a wealth of content to research features, performance, expert opinion, and more.

Apply Logic to Content

While most web content involves at least some reasoning, certain content types lend themselves more to articulating an argument:

- Blog post
- Media article/editorial
- Expert review
- Product or service description
- White paper/fact sheet/report
- Interview

In addition, certain content types make good evidence to support an argument:

- Charts, graphs, and data visualizations
- Testimonials and case studies

For example, Mint.com offers reasoning why it is secure both in its copy and in a video interview with the CEO (Figure 4.9).

For a useful look at the nuances of forming arguments, I recommend Argumentation: The Study of Effective Reasoning by David Zarefsky and Everything’s an Argument by Andrea Lunsford and John J. Ruszkiewicz.
Five Logic Mistakes You’ll Regret

For airtight arguments, don’t let these mistakes (also called fallacies) bubble up in your reasoning.

1. **Generalizing Hastily.** It’s drawing a conclusion based on an odd example (edge case) or a very small set of examples. *SEO will double all companies’ website traffic because SEO doubled her company’s website traffic.*

2. **Distracting with a Red Herring.** It’s making an emotionally charged point that isn’t relevant. *We should spend half of our interactive budget on SEO, unless we want our competitors to trample us like they did on that customer satisfaction survey.*

3. **Confusing Cause with Correlation.** It’s claiming that one event caused another *only* because the events happened at (or close to) the same time. *My company hired an SEO expert, and the next day my dog died. Hiring the SEO expert killed my dog.*

4. **Sliding Down the Slippery Slope.** It’s exaggerating that a situation will lead to a catastrophic chain of events. *If you don’t spend lots of money on SEO, then you’ll lose all of your prospective customers, and then your sales will plummet, and then the terrorists will win.*

5. **Jumping on the Bandwagon.** It’s relying *only* on the evidence that other people are doing it. *Your competitors are spending lots of money on SEO. You should, too.*

Of course, every rule is meant to be broken. Sometimes, using a fallacy is funny.
C. Emotion

It’s how you tap into people’s emotions to hold their interest, gain their sympathies, or motivate them to act. Appealing to emotion involves these related elements:

- **Tone**: The mood conveyed through your words, images, and other content.
- **Style**: Vivid word choice or imagery that’s charged with emotion.

Let’s look at a simple yet clever example from Grasshopper. Instead of a typical name, Grasshopper calls one of its voicemail plans “grow” (Figure 4.10). What entrepreneur doesn’t aspire to grow?

![Grasshopper Plan Name](image-url)

Figure 4.10: Grasshopper taps into emotion with the plan name “grow.”
Handle Feeling with Care

Who determines whether emotion works? Your users. Injecting emotion into your web content is like igniting a fire. You can shine brilliantly—or burn badly. If you consider your users’ cultural values and beliefs, you’re more likely to shine.

In my experience with international brands, different countries and regions respond differently to emotion. Some cultures prefer subtle appeals, while others respond to bold appeals. I’ve shown a range in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Sample of Cultural Considerations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTRY/REGION</th>
<th>PREFERRED STYLE</th>
<th>EXAMPLE</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Canada and Western</td>
<td>Subtle</td>
<td>We neutralize our carbon emissions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Bold</td>
<td>Our travel is 100% carbon neutral.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East</td>
<td>Very bold</td>
<td>We’re the first and best 100% carbon neutral travel company.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Apply Emotion to Content

Content offers many opportunities to charm your users’ emotions.

Voice

It’s the personality or feel of your content. Two very different examples are Bliss and HowStuffWorks.com. Bliss is sassy, while HowStuffWorks is dissecting (Figure 4.11).
Figure 4.11: Bliss has a sassy voice, while HowStuffWorks has an analytical voice.

How Pain Works
by Greg Strombeck, Ph.D.

Inside this Article
1. Introduction to How Pain Works
2. Pain Signal Reception
3. Pain Signal Transmission
4. Pain Pathway
5. Data Contained Theory of Pain
6. Pain Management
7. See more »

What happens when you’re cutting a bagel and slice your hand with the knife? Besides all the blood, you’ll probably feel an immediate sharp pain, followed by a lingering dull ache. Eventually, both pains will go away. But what actually is pain? How do you sense it? What makes it go away? In this article, we’ll examine the neurobiology of pain, the various types of pain and how pain can be treated or managed.

Pain is the most common reason that people seek medical attention. But pain is actually hard to define because it’s a subjective sensation. The International Association for the Study of Pain defines it as an “unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage, or described in terms of such damage.” [Source: International Association for the Study of Pain]

Obviously, this definition is pretty vague. One physician even remarked that pain is whatever the patient says it is. So let’s just say that pain is a warning sensation to your brain that some type of stimulus is causing or may cause damage, and you should probably do something about it.
Sensory Detail

When you portray how things look, sound, smell, taste, or feel, you trigger people’s gut reactions. Lindt, for instance, describes how wonderfully chocolate engages all five senses, tempting a chocoholic like me (Figure 4.12).

Associations with Words and Images

Beyond their literal meanings, words and images stir up feelings (also called connotations). “Grow” in the previous Grasshopper example meant not only a larger voicemail plan but also the ambition to thrive. Refer to Figure 4.10.

2. IRRESISTIBLE IDENTIFICATION

Identification is overcoming our differences to find common ground. It’s the key principle to help you attract the right people. Rhetorician Kenneth Burke defined identification as “any of the wide variety of means by which an author may establish a shared sense of values, attitudes, and interests with his [or her] readers [users].” When users identify with you, they’re more likely to be drawn to you.

Figure 4.12: Lindt uses sensory detail to evoke emotion.
Rhetorical devices are tools to enhance content emotionally. These are text examples, but you can apply many of these devices to images, video, or audio, too.

1. **Hyperbole.** It’s over-the-top exaggeration, usually meant to be funny. *I love quality content so much that I want to marry it.*

2. **Irony.** It’s when the literal and intended meaning are out of sync, often intended to be funny. *You should publish the blog post that you paid someone $10 to write for you.*

3. **Simile.** It compares unlike things. *This stagnant content is like a cesspool.*

4. **Rhetorical Question.** It’s a question for dramatic effect, not asking for a literal answer. *Do we really want to keep creating terrible web content?*

5. **Personification.** It’s adding personality or human qualities to a concept or object. *The website threw content from 1999 in my general direction.*

**Identify on the Right Level**

We connect with people who are like us on different levels.

**Shallow**

People relate superficially to people who share the same demographics. We can identify quickly with people who appear to be just like us. For example, the Alice home page features a thirty-something woman—a key demographic for household goods ([Figure 4.13](#)).

![Figure 4.13: The photo of a woman represents an important demographic for Alice.](#)
Deep

People connect more intensely to other people in a similar role or with like values, interests, and beliefs. Relating to people deeply can transcend shallow differences. In his historic campaign to become the first African American president of the United States, Barack Obama stressed change (Figure 4.14). That value came to life in the slogan “change we can believe in” and web content such as interviews, videos, photos, tweets, and other web content that showed Obama’s personality and way of thinking as a change.

Not Everyone Will Identify with You—and That’s OK

It’s hard to watch people turn away from your company or cause. Even the successful Obama campaign didn’t attract everyone. When you try to reach everyone, you risk reaching no one. As content marketing expert Joe Pulizzi says, “Your brand has to stand for something. If everyone loves you, you might be doing something wrong.” As long as you’re attracting the people you want to attract—whether qualified leads or enthusiastic supporters—you can rest easy if someone turns away.
Apply Identification to Content
To attract people who identify with you or your organization, web content can help.

Persona/Character/Spokesperson
It’s representing your organization with a person or character (or two or three) who relates well to your users. For example, HowStuffWorks offers a collection of podcasts hosted by relevant personalities. The most popular is Stuff You Should Know. On this podcast, the self-proclaimed geeks Josh and Chuck banter about, well, stuff they think other geeks should know (Figure 4.15).

Another example is @sharpiesusan, a persona who embodies Sharpie on Twitter. (For more about how Sharpie’s use of personas evolved, see the sidebar Sharpie’s Shift from Celebrities to Personas and Users.)
User-Generated Content

Similar to personas, your users can represent you well. How? Through comments and content they contribute to your social networking space. The right potential customers will identify with your current customers. The trick is to facilitate the discussion so it stays true to your brand and your users. FootSmart, for example, carefully cultivates community on its active Facebook page (Figure 4.16).
**Cause Content**

Another approach is creating content around a cause. Research from the public relations firm Edelman has found that supporting a cause could even inspire users to switch brands. Select a cause that fits your brand values and your users’ values. For example, REI devotes much content to environmental concerns (Figure 4.17).

![REI Environment Content](image)

**Figure 4.17:** The environment is a cause close to the hearts of many REI users and relates to REI’s brand as an outdoor outfitter.
Sharpie’s Shift from Celebrities to Personas and Users


Sharpie enjoyed soccer star David Beckham’s representation in several commercials. In them, Beckham signs autographs with fans’ Sharpies—and becomes so enamored with the pens he humorously tries to score one for himself. While these commercials succeeded, the rise of consumer creativity and social networking inspired Sharpie to try a new approach.

Sharpie developed a persona on Twitter, @sharpiesusan (Susan Wassel), who shares news and tips as well as banters with Sharpie customers.

At the same time, Sharpie introduced Sharpie Uncapped (www.sharpieuncapped.com), which curates the elaborate artistic creations by Sharpie users. As Wassel notes, the effort “celebrates the amazing and inspiring things our fans are doing with our product while encouraging others to uncap their own creativity. The goal is to amplify our efforts and engage our passionate fans in the social space with compelling content.”
While pioneering this approach to content has meant a lot of work and a lot of lessons learned, the effort has paid off, say Wassel and Bert DuMars, Vice President of E-Business and Interactive Marketing for Newell Rubbermaid.

“The overall integrated marketing program helped us grow Sharpie into the number one writing instruments brand in North America in 2010. We have also successfully achieved a significant foothold in brand community and engagement building with our Sharpie Facebook page reaching 1.2 million fans,” says DuMars.

Adds Wassel, “What we’re doing is clearly resonating. We have more than a million fans on Facebook alone—highly engaged fans who comment and share in huge numbers. And, we just recently expanded the bandwidth on our blog to accommodate dramatic increases in traffic. Truth is, we’re as passionate about our fans as they are about us. I think that comes through.”
Story Content
Still another approach to identification is telling a story, or narrative. A story allows you to bring values to life in a memorable—even entertaining—way. Because a story often involves credibility, logic, and emotion, too, it makes a strong influential impact. You can find a story in almost anything, but I find two types work well for practical purposes.

Brand/Organization Story
If you’re a startup, tell the tale of solving a tough problem or making a big change to help people. Grasshopper, for example, offers the concise but compelling story of its founding (Figure 4.18). If you’re more established, explore your history (see Credibility) or the story of an innovation or accomplishment.

Figure 4.18: Grasshopper tells the tale of its entrepreneurial roots.
Chapter 4: Rhetoric: The Art of Influence

Client/Customer Case Study
Case studies recount how you help your users. One approach is *dramatization*. For example, BooneOakley, an advertising agency in North Carolina, humorously explains why it’s different (**Figure 4.19**). The agency shares the story of Billy, a typical marketing director who goes to the typical advertising agencies in New York and gets typical work—only to be fired, then untypically killed.

**Figure 4.19**: BooneOakley, located in North Carolina, dramatizes why it’s different through the story of a marketing director.

---

THE STORY OF A SLIPPERY SLOPE

The BooneOakley video website employs the logical fallacy of sliding down the slippery slope to hilarious effect. See it at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Elo7Welydh8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Elo7Welydh8)

A different approach is to present *actual customer stories*. A series of iPhone videos, for instance, showcases real users explaining how the iPhone saved the day. In one, a pilot recalls how he looked up the weather on the iPhone to help his flight avoid a three-hour delay (**Figure 4.20**).
Although Burke defined identification in the 1950s, I wonder whether he had a crystal ball that let him glimpse the 21st century. He felt identification could happen within a short paragraph, a long series of communications over time, and everything in between. So, now, let’s turn to two principles of timing.

3. REPETITION THAT DOESN’T BORE OR BROADCAST

The ancient Greeks crafted creative ways of repeating ideas. Why go to such pains? Those toga-sporting orators knew that repetition helps people remember—but also risks boring them. Today, when we use tweets, emails, and ads to blast a message again, again, again, again, again, and AGAIN, our users could tune us out. So, let’s take a closer look at repetition.

Three Really Is a Charm

When it comes to making the same point, three times is enough. Research everywhere from speech communication to television advertising suggests three as the magic number.10 A challenge with web content is that we can’t control exactly how many times a user sees or hears our message. But, we can control how often we publish the same message, how often we change the message, and how we bring the message to life through web content. We can avoid bombarding our users.

Apply Repetition to Content

With web content and some help from modern media, we have the power to plan our repetition wisely.
Editorial Calendar
It’s a tool borrowed from journalism to plan content over time (Figure 4.21).\footnote{11}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Important Dates</td>
<td>Blog Post</td>
<td>Content Type/Event #1</td>
<td>Content Type/Event #2</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Week of August 16</td>
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<td>Tuesday, August 17, 2010</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Wednesday, August 18, 2010</td>
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<td>Thursday, August 19, 2010</td>
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<td>Friday, August 20, 2010</td>
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<td>Week of August 23</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>Monday, August 23, 2010</td>
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<td>Monday, August 30, 2010</td>
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<td>Thursday, September 02, 2010</td>
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</table>

Figure 4.21: A simple editorial calendar tracks what content to publish when.

Usually a spreadsheet or table, the exact form of an editorial calendar doesn’t matter so much as the planning. When you decide in detail what content you will publish and when, you’re more likely to repeat messages, topics, and themes appropriately.

For a longer look at editorial calendars for business, see “How to Put Together an Editorial Calendar for Content Marketing” by Michele Linn at Content Marketing Institute (www.contentmarketinginstitute.com).

For an examination of editorial strategy for media and entertainment, see “Exploring Editorial Strategy” by Jeffrey MacIntyre at Predicate, LLC (predicate-llc.com).

Hook
As journalism slang, it refers to why content is relevant at a particular time. A hook can help you breathe new life into your message, theme, or topic. Some examples include tying content to

- The season
- An anniversary
- A recognition, such as becoming first, most, or best
- A current event or an industry trend

For example, AOL News took the 40th anniversary of the Apollo 11 moon landing as an opportunity to reenact it through web content—videos, animation, audio, photos, and more (Figure 4.22).

Amplification

It’s all the ways to amplify, or enhance, your point instead of repeating it like a robot. For example, on the television show Northern Exposure, the poetic DJ Chris Stevens used amplification to explain the meaning of light:

“Goethe’s final words: ‘More light.’ Ever since we crawled out of that primordial slime, that’s been our unifying cry: ‘More light.’ Sunlight. Torchligh. Candlelight. Neon. Incandescent. Lights that banish the darkness from our caves, to illuminate our roads, the insides of our refrigerators. Big floods for the night games at Soldier Field. Little tiny flashlights for those books we read under the covers when we’re supposed to be asleep. Light is more than watts and foot-candles. Light is metaphor.”

Classic rhetoricians used words to intensify a point. Today, we can augment an idea through web content in several ways.
Content Formats and Types

We can make points through a combination of photos, podcasts, videos, articles, and more. HowStuffWorks, for example, offers several ways to experience the danger of sharks (Figure 4.23).

![Figure 4.23: Video, photos, and text intensify the danger of sharks.](image)

AMPLIFYING ISN’T ADDING

Amplification does not mean more web content is better. You still have to select or craft the content carefully to develop your point.

Echo

It’s a phenomenon on social networking sites where other people share or restate your message or your content. When that happens, you don’t have to state it yourself so often. (An extreme version of this is having something go “viral.”) A case in point is CDC on Twitter and Facebook (Figure 4.24). When CDC posts an update, users share it with others.
Three Devices to Repeat Words Remarkably

The ancient Greeks had all kinds of devices for repeating words. Consider these three for emphasis.

1. **Anaphora.** Repeating a word or phrase at the beginning of each clause. *Content attracts people. Content motivates people. Content guides people.*

2. **Antistasis.** Repetition of a word in a different or contrary sense. *Don’t be content with your lackluster content.*

3. **Diacope.** Repetition of a word or phrase broken up by one or more intervening words. *Content, content, content—where will we get the content?*
4. THE OPPORTUNE MOMENT!

Time. A concept so complex, the Greeks had not one, but two, words for it. *Chronos* meant chronological time, such as morning, noon, and night. *Kairos* meant the opportune moment. It’s the *right time* to say something in the *right way*. I think of it as the ideal time to ask people to change their viewpoint or to take an action. The key is to ask when people are ready.

**Don’t Ask Too Much Too Soon or Too Often**

Ancient rhetoricians felt the opportune moment was *special*. It didn’t come along everyday. That’s worth remembering when we’re tempted to press users quickly for personal information or bombard them with emails and tweets. As a simple example from Content Science, we send an email once per *quarter* to our email list. Our email open rate is 50 percent. When I shared that high rate with a marketing friend, she nearly fell out of her chair.

**Ask Clearly**

People won’t respond how you’d like if they aren’t sure what you want. For instance, Content Science assessed this original version of a CDC website about travel health. We found some quality content to help travelers stay healthy. But, what CDC recommended people should *do* was vague (*Figure 4.25*). CDC even tested this website with real users, most of whom were very interested in the content but confused about what to do next. (For a case study of how we improved this website, see Chapter 5.)

**React to a Crisis Promptly**

A hurricane strikes. A CEO resigns. A damaging video goes viral. Sometimes, the opportune moment arises because of a shocking event. When I worked for CDC, I occasionally took a turn responding to everything from bioterrorism to SARS. I can assure you it’s much better to say *something* trustworthy sooner, not later, so people don’t panic or spread rumors.
Figure 4.25: A website vaguely asks people to travel healthy.
Apply the Opportune Moment to Content

On the web, our content can seize *kairos* in several ways.

**Advertisement**

Chapter 1 noted how ads annoy people. What if ads were more relevant to a website’s topics and users? For example, *National Geographic’s* readers typically care about the environment. An IBM ad stays pertinent with the message to “build a smarter planet” (Figure 4.26).

![Figure 4.26: A relevant ad on the National Geographic website.](image)

**Call to Action**

Clear, concise, and earnest—what makes a good call to action. Mayo Clinic Health Manager offers an unmistakable invitation to begin the sign-up process with a button labeled “Get started now” (Figure 4.27).

![Figure 4.27: An effective call to action appears on Mayo Clinic Health Manager.](image)
The Deck: An Innovative System of Advertising

The Deck is a unique advertising system that ensures quality, relevant ads for publications in the creative industry such as Jeffrey Zeldman’s *A List Apart*. Jim Coudal, co-creator of The Deck and president of Coudal Partners, explains the system this way:

“The Deck takes the approach that to be successful we need to address the needs of all three parties involved in the advertising:

- **Site publishers** get vetted, truly relevant ads in a manageable size and without animation or other tricks.
- **Advertisers** get an uncluttered impression to an involved and curious audience.
- **Readers** get ads that don’t insult them about relevant products while the sites they like to read can write and post more with the financial support of the network.

Too much of current online advertising does not treat all three parties as equally important. It’s that balance that makes The Deck work so well for publishers, advertisers, and readers.”
Instruction
Sometimes, helping people act requires more than a well-labeled button. In that case, contextual instructions come to the rescue. The Mayo Clinic Health Manager shown in Figure 4.27 includes simple instructions. As another example, Grasshopper offers plainly worded instructions to make a referral (Figure 4.28).

Crisis Response
How can you respond aptly? By planning for crisis situations. You can’t prepare for the exact crisis, but you can think of possible crises and have a plan that answers questions like these:

- Where will we publish a response?
- Who should write and approve a response?
- If we need extra people to help us monitor and respond to questions on social networking, how will we get those people?
What are examples of a good response?
What style of response is appropriate for our users and our brand?

For example, when his popular wine website Cork’d was hacked, Gary Vaynerchuk didn’t hide his head in the sand or scramble. Instead, he reacted with a truthful, even funny, video (Figure 4.29).

The CDC responds in a different style to a different crisis—a salmonella outbreak in eggs. A no-nonsense daily summary explains the latest status and what people should do about it (Figure 4.30).
WHEN TO USE WHAT PRINCIPLES

Aristotle advocated applying a mix of influential techniques. Getting the mix right is an art. Without it, users will feel bored, manipulated, or pressured. Indeed, getting the mix wrong will make your results worse than if you use no techniques.  

The right mix of principles depends largely on the context. So, let’s map these principles to context—the phases of clout (Figure 4.31).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 1</th>
<th>Phase 2</th>
<th>Phase 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Raise Awareness</td>
<td>Become Liked &amp; Trusted</td>
<td>Motivate, Inspire, &amp; Help Action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1A. Credibility</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1B. Logic</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1C. Emotion</td>
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<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Identification</td>
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<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Repetition</td>
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<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The Opportune Moment</td>
<td>✓</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.30: CDC cuts to the chase of a disease crisis.

Figure 4.31: A guide to using rhetorical principles to achieve clout.

Investigation Update: Multistate Outbreak of Human *Salmonella* Enteritidis Infections Associated with Shell Eggs

August 27, 2010

On This Page

Investigation of the Outbreak | Laboratory Testing | Recall Information | Clinical Features/Signs and Symptoms | Advice to Consumers | General Information | Additional Resources | CDC’s Role in Food Safety | Previous Updates

**Today’s Highlights**

- From May 1 to August 25, 2010, approximately 1,470 reported illnesses were likely to be associated with this outbreak.
- FDA testing identified *Salmonella* in egg farm environmental samples.
- Don’t eat recalled eggs. Recalled eggs might still be in grocery stores, restaurants, and consumers’ homes. Consumers who have recalled eggs should discard them or return them to their retailer for a refund. A searchable database of products affected by the recall is available to consumers.
- Individuals who think they might have become ill from eating recalled eggs should consult their health care providers.
In the first two phases, influencing people’s *attitude* is critical, so rely on principles that establish your credibility, likability, and trustworthiness. As you enter the third phase, use principles that influence people’s *actions*.

A basic example is that Grasshopper emphasizes its credibility through showing awards, quotes, and a guarantee on its Features page. However, on the Sign Up page, Grasshopper does not include content about credibility. Instead, the page focuses on guiding people to subscribe (Figure 4.32).

For ideas to plan the right mix of principles for specific situations, see Chapter 6.
SUMMARY

Rhetoric is not a dark art and should no longer be a lost art. Ancient rhetoric offers creative guidance to turn your modern web content into a source of clout—and consequently get results. The art is in combining rhetorical principles well. But, that’s not all you need. Turn the page for four more principles grounded in science.

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