

# Every piece of content matters



## an interview with Gerry McGovern

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Gerry Gaffney:

This is Gerry Gaffney with the User Experience podcast.

My guest today has been in the internet game for many, many years. Older listeners like myself may remember the Nua newsletter, which was one of the first to cover the importance of content and branding on the internet.

He's written several books, received a variety of awards for writing speaking and presenting, and he's widely regarded as one of the foremost experts on designing online content.

His most recent book, published in 2006, and that's the most recent of several books in fact, is entitled "Killer web content: make the sale, deliver the service, build the brand".

Gerry McGovern:

Thank you very much Gerry.

Gerry Gaffney:

Do you ever feel that you're banging your head against a wall?

Gerry McGovern:

Oh, I used to, a bit. But I think you realise that what we're doing here has major significance in the sense of how societies and how economies are changing, and that

societies and economies don't change in a year or two years. And if we look back, we can see a lot of progress, I think, overall, in how the web has developed. And I think if you put it in the context of major developments, we're probably still in the middle of the beginning of it.

I think it's easy for us who are deeply involved in it to feel that it's not moving fast enough, but for people who have to address it as part of an overall strategy within an organisation, or to change job roles or functions, which I often find actually needs to happen if you're going to truly use the web properly... You either need new skills sets, new types of people, or people need to change their jobs. And sometimes even departments need to change their structure.

So, in that larger context I think it's moving, it could always move along faster, but it's moving. I definitely think it's moving. It is at times frustrating but I think I've almost gone through the frustration, head-banging barrier and realised that we just need to move ahead one step at a time. But progress is being made.

Gerry Gaffney:

So do you see yourself as a change agent on the internet?

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Gerry McGovern:

Yeah. I think an awful lot of what I do might be labelled change management, because it's really about shifting work practices and the view of the purpose of content or information and how it's treated, how it's regarded within the organisation.

A lot of it is really changing hearts and minds. I keep trying to convince organisations, particularly larger ones, that they need full-time resources to manage findability, and the whole search area.

And they begin to get that message, but it takes them six or nine months, or longer, to agree with HR a new type of job profile, or to find the budget or to shift somebody over from another job. But they've begun to realise that not finding stuff on their intranet or public website is causing a lot of grief and problems. And that to find stuff it's just not enough to have a search engine – you need human resources behind it that are managing that environment.

So it is really change management, unfortunately, to some extent. The big boys of change management, the Accentures or whatever, have convinced organisations that change management really needs to occur in other areas of the business, and it's much more recognised... in relation to how the web is changing the organisation. But it's moving.

Gerry Gaffney:

A question without notice: We've just in the last few days seen the release of Bing. Have you had a look at that and how do you think that's going to affect the whole internet landscape out there?

Gerry McGovern:

Yeah, I've had a look at it, and who knows? I think that one of the key, talking about change management is that... Bing and that Wolfram Alpha before it... to a degree, they

followed that classical old-school marketing PR. Oh, get everybody excited and they haven't even used the product. But I think the web is about... You know, Google didn't do a big PR campaign. We'll judge Bing over the next six months or nine months.

Is it useful, does it help us find stuff better, rather than, you know, being convinced historically like robots with a big pre-marketing campaign. You know, if it's a good search engine it'll rise. If it's not, it'll sink. People will decide that, not PR companies, not marketing companies, not big TV ads.

One thing just connected with Bing which I found disappointing is you go to the page and... Google is absolutely obsessed with time so it's all about slender page white. You go to the Bing page and there's a big graphic in the background, as if... Who in marketing got behind that? Oh it's not enough to have a search engine, we have to have somebody climbing a mountain or whales swimming in the sea. Because people won't feel they're having a good experience searching unless we have some sort of mammy whale and the little baby whales swimming around. You know, that's a bit worrying. Is that their thinking? Just make a search engine, forget about the images.

Gerry Gaffney:

Do you remember the first time you used Google?

Gerry McGovern:

I do. Well, not quite but I remember how Google spread. Somebody in the company, in Nua, I'm pretty sure somebody sent me an email and says "Whoa, here's a really interesting search engine we've come across" because you know it was AltaVista then, and I used it and it was great! And I told other people, and some of them thought

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it was great and they told other people. And that's the web, that's Twitter, that's YouTube, that's MySpace, that's practically everything that has every succeeded on the web. You know, people have decided this is good, they haven't needed some big advertising agency to kind of semi-brainwash them and convince them through fancy words and soft focus music and stuff like that. The web decided.

Gerry Gaffney:

So it's a very democratic process.

Gerry McGovern:

Well, it's a different... it's a kind of a process which says if it's crap it's crap, and no amount of PR marketing will change it. If it's a good search engine, people will use it, and they'll find what they need to find and it'll be judged by its actual function and usage.

You know, the type of things that really don't work on the web in a sense is the way you see Coca-Cola being advertised with beautiful ads that are just Dadaesque mini-films. That's not the web. The web is useful things. [Laughs.] It thrives based on usage. You know, Kayak where you can find the best price for flights, or the eBays, you know, it thrives on doing things.

Twitter is... many people wonder what function it serves, but it serves a function of communication and maybe a human search engine. But it's not being decided by an ad campaign or a PR campaign. It's being decided through usage.

Gerry Gaffney:

You mentioned fancy words, there. [Laughs.] Tell me about one of your fancy words to me is "carewords". Is that just a fancy name for keywords or what's that all about?

Gerry McGovern:

There's an obsession in the search, and obviously it's a necessary obsession, of getting found. So, many people have now got it, so to speak. The big search engine optimisation industry is doing everything possible to structure the site in a way that makes it more findable. But getting found is just the first step in somebody solving a problem or completing a task.

There's a different set of words, often, that become important once you're found. That's what I call carewords. We did some work with universities, and there was a top what we call careword or carephrase ... Why would you choose a university? The phrase that really resonated in one university, with hundreds of students, was "prestigious well-recognised degree". Now you'd never search for that.

When we did it for a car manufacturer, the top phrase was "affordability".

Gerry Gaffney:

This is after people have found your site, suddenly we switch from the keywords that they used to get there, or whatever navigational method they used to get there, to a completely different set of terms, yeah?

Gerry McGovern:

Yeah. They're not, so to speak, completely different. It's like running one of those relays, a 400-metre relay, and you have to pass the stick. The keywords run the first 100 metres, and they have to pass the stick on to the carewords, because I think they run the next 300 metres.

Keywords get you there, but often to do something serious you're going two or three levels down through a site. And at each level there's a set of words that are very, very important.

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And they are, as you say, completely different but interrelated. And sometimes, not always, they're oppositional... People will search for cheap hotels, but they don't want to see "cheap hotel" on the website.

So sometimes they're actually oppositional. You search for "cheap hotel Dublin" but you don't want to come to a hotel website that says "Welcome to our dirt-cheap hotel".

Sometimes you get words that people actually search with, but they don't necessarily want to read when they get there. It's understanding the psychology of behaviour, that one set of words gets you there, but another set of words completes the sale, or completes the task.

Gerry Gaffney:

I guess those customer carewords are kind of invisible because people who are monitoring their traffic and their stats and so on will be watching keywords, but they may not have any way of looking at those carewords, would they?

Gerry McGovern:

No, not statistically, not through the data, not through the search data, because you won't search for those words. You won't search for "prestigious well-recognised degree". You might search for "affordability". Another bunch of MBAs we did, the number one reason they chose an MBA was "advance your career".

If you had a classification on the home page that says "Advance your career" or "Career advancement", that would really trigger somebody to click on that.

But they wouldn't necessarily search for those things. We've developed a kind of separate offline technique or methodology, a kind of voting-based system that identifies those top carewords or the top

tasks, and often they're very much connected with a task within an environment.

We did it for Pioneer a couple of years ago. They wanted to sell more satellite GPS, satellite navigation systems, GPS systems. The top phrase was "automatically and quickly recalculates your route if you miss a turn or change your mind". Now that's a big sentence, but it really resonated. I never thought something like that would get voted for, but... every group it was the Number 1. 18 to 25 year olds, 25 to 35 year olds, 55 to 65, business users, casual users, Germans, French, the same phrase was first in every single group.

And when you think of that phrase – "automatically and quickly recalculates a route". When you think of using the GPS... I had not used a GPS system when I had done that, and then I'd got a car rental about two months later, and it had a GPS in it. And I realised, I was in Houston, in Texas, I realised how important it was that the GPS could recalculate if you had missed the turn. Because often the key thing about navigation is the last mile. It's not the previous hundred miles, because you can broadly get to Houston. But by God, trying to find your way around Houston, or Paris, to get that last mile-and-a-half... So it kind of got to the essence of why do we buy something.

But you'd never search for that.

Gerry Gaffney:

No. It's a very clear statement of the value proposition, though, isn't it? It's funny because I've just been running a workshop today and yesterday on a vaguely similar area and getting statements that specify the value proposition [is] really important.

But how would an organisation come up with that phrase? Obviously they could go

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to gerrymcgovern.com and hire you, but in the absence of that, how are they going to identify what these carewords are?

Gerry McGovern:

Well, you'd look at... definitely search as an input will give you a hint. So I would go and I'd look at the top search terms... if it was a public area I'd use Google Adwords. That's a source, but I wouldn't just take them, I'd try to think behind those words, so to speak. I'd look at the most visited pages on the site. I'd look at competitor websites. When we did the Pioneer thing, we went to all the competitor websites. Then we went to all the websites that were selling satellite navigation systems. And basically, anywhere we found anything approaching a phrase or a proposition or a value statement, we just put it down.

We used an Excel spreadsheet, and at the end of the Pioneer process we had almost a thousand phrases. And it was, like, "world clock", anything that was a feature, anything that was anything connected with the product and its function and its usefulness, we just put it down. "Small size", "anti-glare screen", features, benefits, functions. And when you start putting all that stuff down and then iterating through it, you find loads of duplicates and all sorts of things. You basically throw your net out really, really wide, for all the words and phrases that could possibly be connected with this challenge, this issue.

We spent about six weeks doing that, and at the end of that process, if they never even bought it, they have a kind of.... We try to bring it down to under a hundred phrases or tasks.

One of the top things we found in the universities, again and again, was quality of the professors, top quality professors and lecturers. That kept coming up high. The funny thing is if you go to a huge number...

The two top tasks in universities are the degree, the course, find a course, and hopefully it's a prestigious one that you offer, right? But find a course is the top task, and the second one is "How good are the people who are teaching this course?"

And yet you go to a huge number of university websites and it's really hard to find those crucial things that students want to know.

Gerry Gaffney:

I guess the work that you're describing here implies a very strong focus on the users, and I guess that's typically what's lacking in a lot of these sites, isn't it, and a lot of these organisations?

Gerry McGovern:

Absolutely. It's saying know your customer better than they know themselves, and really, really dig in. Many organisations, they'll sit together, they'll do their best. But they'll spend, you know, a day or two in a workshop internally, and they'll try and second-guess. That's old-school thinking. The web, and what we were saying earlier about change management, it's about... this is self-service, this is about knowing your customer, this is about knowing the language, and realising that often the language that triggers you is not the language that triggers your customer. And that words, getting words exactly right can have a massive difference.

Gerry Gaffney:

OK, tell me about the "long neck" and why does it matter?

Gerry McGovern:

Well, it matters because...

Gerry Gaffney:

Tell us what it is first, Gerry.

Gerry McGovern:

Yeah, it's the small set of stuff... I'm writing a new book, now, Gerry, that's called "The Stranger's Long Neck". It's called that because your customer is always the stranger. Never assume that you'll be a friend of the customer. The customer is always on the outside. And there's things that really, really matter to them, and that's what the long neck... a small set of stuff. Like that, you know, we tested 100 phrases with the satnav, but "automatically and quickly recalculates a route...", that was either 12% or 14% of the vote, which is, out of a hundred choices is huge.

It's the small set of stuff. Every time we did it. We did it with the National Health Service in the UK recently. And the long neck task in health, and it was the same whether they were doctors or patients, long-term illness or short-term illness, whether they were North of England or South of England, whether they were in the highest income bracket or the lowest income bracket, the long neck task in health was "check symptoms". I find that in every environment that I've ever worked in there's a Book of Light. There's a core essence reason why the website exists.

Even though websites say "Oh, no, they're an airline, they have a real clarity of why they exist, but we're a much more complicated entity." I had somebody say to me last week that... it's a 1000-person organisation... We did a big project for Microsoft as well and we found a long neck task there, and they said to me with a totally straight face, they said, they had 1000 people and they said, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, but that's Microsoft, we're a much more complicated organisation."

Gerry Gaffney:

[Laughs.] God help them!

Gerry McGovern:

But that's what every... Every organisation I go into, they don't want... "Oh no, no, no, no, we don't have a small set of things that are really, really important, we've got millions of things."

And you know what that essentially is? "We are not managers. We are afraid to manage, we don't want to manage, we don't want to make difficult choices." Because the non-manager chooses everything, because by choosing everything you don't make enemies internally, you don't really get stressed. "Ah, yeah, we'll put that up, we need to give resources to that." That's the non-manager.

Gerry Gaffney:

That expression "Book of Light" - where does that come from?

Gerry McGovern:

Well I don't know. This essential thing that the website should do well. Like a great intranet, the Book of Light of a great intranet is "find people". If you've got any size of an intranet, find people is the top task.

But nobody wants to look after it. You know, nobody wants to do it right. I sat with an organisation last week, where clearly, clearly, clearly "find people" was the top task. But the conversation very quickly became "Oh, how do we do personalisation?" I said, nobody gives a crap about personalisation, they want to find people, and yet here ye are, ye don't want to focus on find people, because it's boring, and it's not sexy, it's not exciting. You want to spend a couple of million on personalisation that nobody wants, right? You don't want to do the basics, you want to do the cool stuff, because it makes you look cool.

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Gerry Gaffney:

You sure now, Gerry, that you don't ever feel you're banging your head against the wall?

Gerry McGovern:

[Laughs.] But you know what? When I said that five years ago, they would have said "leave the building". When I said it last week, they said "You know what, you're right." There was a change in mood. You make one step forward, you go a couple of steps back, you make a couple of steps forward. But I see much less... you still get that coming up but it's easier to tamp down than it used to be.

Five, six years ago they just went ahead, they didn't even have the conversation, they just went ahead. IT, you know, there was no strategy, there was IT buying a new CMS, or buying a new portal, or buying a new... there was no strategy, that was the strategy.

Gerry Gaffney:

I was amused by one of your recent newsletters, you talked about "needy children". Who are the needy children?

Gerry McGovern:

Well, this is, either in the intranet or public websites and it kind of connects to some degree with what we talked about. The departments who see their purpose in life or divisions or managers, that they're running a project or a program or some sort of a scheme, and they have to get that promoted on the website, because that's important to their key performance indicators, or their bonuses or their ego or their next career move or otherwise.

So you get this internal organisational... eating itself alive from the inside. The egos, the lunatics take over the asylum. They want to publish and put stuff up, and they make life hell for the web team.

The web team knows what the right thing to do is. Any web team that's around today knows that putting up loads and loads of stuff is not a productive, efficient way to run a website. But, unfortunately, they don't have much authority within most organisations. So they're bombarded internally by all these little vanity and ego needs... "this is really important, it has to be on the home page. This is really important, it has to be on the home page. This is really important..." It's really important not to the customer, but to the manager or the department... or the program, or the section that is actually doing it. And they are driving the website into uselessness by their neediness.

Gerry Gaffney:

Right. Into uselessness is a bit of a negative comment about the world, isn't it? [Laughs.]

Gerry McGovern:

Well, you publish about everything, you put every piece of content up... We did a lot of work with Microsoft over the years, and Microsoft have found recently that when they start removing and hiding stuff in office.com or excel.com, their customer satisfaction figures jump. The more they published, the worse the customer satisfaction got.

And this is connected with the concept of, if there are top tasks, then there are tiny tasks. And the tiny tasks kill the top tasks. Every piece of content has three impacts. Every page on the website has three impacts.

It impacts the search, because it's another page to be indexed. So it makes the search that bit more complicated to actually do.

It impacts the navigation, because it's at least one more link in the architecture. It has to be linked from somewhere, right? So

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it's at least on extra link, and the more links you have in the navigation, the more confusing the navigation becomes.

And the final thing it impacts is the time. It had to be written, it had to be put up. And it might have to be reviewed. Nobody wants to review any pages that are published, but if they were doing a good job they'd be reviewed.

So all these tiny tasks, and there are millions of them. There's a few top tasks, but there's thousands of the tiny tasks. They're like tiny little things, and in and of themselves they're just like little cute bunnies. But they breed by the thousands. You know, it's just one little bunny, and then the whole place is overrun by them. And you can't manage them, you can't navigate them.

People would come to Microsoft, to Excel, and they'd want to add numbers. Millions of people every month, or hundreds of thousands of people would just have the simple task of wanting to add a number, or sum a number, in Excel. Because they wouldn't use Excel all that much, but they'd want to know how to do it.

And they'd find these search results called the IMSUM function. And the IMSUM function is a mathematical function for mathematicians. But they'd look, quickly scan the search results, "Oh, IMSUM, that must be how you sum". They'd click on that and they'd get totally confused and annoyed and frustrated.

So when they started hiding all these things like IMSUM functions, and really making them really difficult to find in search, and only linking them into certain pathways that scientists and mathematicians could find, people could then find the page much more easily for sum numbers or add numbers.

And everybody was happy, because the mathematicians could still find them, because they had a very special need and a special way of doing it. But the people who were just coming to book the flight, so to speak, sum the number, were finding the right page really quickly.

That takes management to really understand what really, really matters in this environment, and to prioritise it, and to realise that the stuff that doesn't matter can have a negative impact, and to de-prioritise it.

Gerry Gaffney:

I guess so far we've talked about... you've alluded to quality of content but you've been talking about organising and finding content, I guess.

But if we re-focus a little bit maybe on the quality of the content itself, isn't the democratisation of content production bound to result in poor quality? You know, the way that a lot of organisations now allow multiple people to publish, and wikis and Twitters and social media, and the whole Web 2 thing where everyone's an author and a publisher. Isn't that by definition going to produce poorer quality content?

Gerry McGovern:

Absolutely. Basically, there's a book inside everyone, and the web let the book out. Many of those books should never have seen the light of day – most of them. Out in the general web, the cream rises to the top in a way.

MySpace or YouTube, none of those would be any use if we couldn't find the top videos, if the top stuff did not have a way to rise to the top. But what happens within organisations is that, it's not the democratisation of content, it's find the

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most junior person in the organisation, and lump them with the job of updating our section of the website. From a democratisation point of view it's not that the great people within the organisation do it. It's the most junior, least paid people. It's democratised downwards to the summer interns, the contractors. Let's give content creation and production to the least important people within the organisation. Therefore you get... you get the garbage pile, and you get no quality standards, and you get a junkyard in many organisations because you get the website you deserve.

You know, you don't democratise the manufacture of cars, or the creation of a swine flu vaccine. [Laughs.] You don't just say, "Ah, just throw it out there, there's a bit of code and it'll work itself out."

Content quality... it's not easy to write well. It's easy to write.

Gerry Gaffney:

Let me get a bit of free consulting time here, Gerry.

I'm working with a government organisation at the moment, and they're very keen, some of the members of the organisation, to start a blog, and they've got a very good rationale. They need to do an outreach program to people, younger people in particular who are not getting the message, and it's an important message. But they're saying, like, we'll just do this blog and all we've got to do is, you know, sign up to one of the standard blog providers out there, and it'll only take us an hour or two a week.

How long does it take to maintain a blog?

Gerry McGovern:

It might only take them 10 minutes a week, if nobody actually replies. You know, if you want to start a blog, you're really

starting conversations. If you want to engage with people, in essence starting a blog is saying, "I'm going to get in my car on Monday morning and I'm going to go to [a] Canberra youth centre, then I'm going to get on a plane, I'm going to go to Melbourne and I'm going to spend a week going around all the youth centres. And I'm going to talk to people."

And blogging is a slightly less difficult but still very time-intensive process of engaging people in conversations. And what you'll find initially is that unless you make that tremendous effort, you'll have a ghost blog. Nobody will comment, nobody will participate, nobody will reply.

Gerry Gaffney:

So, Gerry, how did you first get interested in the whole content area. What was the spark for it?

Gerry McGovern:

Well, I was basically a freelance journalist and a number of other things. I came across the web very early on and I thought... I remember when I was very young, I used to love to watch these Westerns and see the wagons going out west, and I thought I'd never be part of something where you'd get on those wagons, and go out to a new world.

I made myself a promise that if you ever see those wagons going out west you've got to get on them. And the first time I saw the web I had that sense of, you know, this is the opening up of a new world.

And I think it still is. We've had ups and downs, but the web is a new society in a way, it's a new way of living, it's a new way of buying and working... So it was that sense of, this is something that doesn't come along too often.



Gerry Gaffney:

And if listeners want to follow up on anything Gerry's talking about I highly recommend they go to [gerrymcgovern.com](http://gerrymcgovern.com) and sign up to the newsletter.

Gerry McGovern, thanks for talking to me today on the User Experience podcast.

Gerry McGovern:

Thanks very much, Gerry, for inviting me. Thank you.

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