

# WHITE PAPER

## Digital Strategies for Successful News Stories

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The ways people get and consume news are constantly changing and growing, and mobile devices are fueling that connection. A November 2019 Pew Research Center survey found that 8 in 10 U.S. adults get news on mobile devices either sometimes or often.

News is within arm's reach on a mobile device via push notifications, apps, emails, social media and more. This method makes it easy for news to be read quickly and dismissed easily.

The challenge is delivering information that people want to read, in ways that will stand out in a crowded digital landscape. The keys include having a digital and editorial strategy, and digging out the nuggets of news that really help your institution or organization stand out and differentiate itself.

After all, it takes a long time to create great news stories. You want to optimize that investment and product into something people are excited to see.

## Plan for Effective News Stories

Make your news unique and stand out from others providing the same information by focusing on the stories. Everyone and everything has a unique angle or aspect behind it.

Content creators and organizations that can bring out the stories, rather than simply reciting the news, will differentiate themselves.

### What Does "Better" Web Content Mean?

<b>Findable</b>	<b>Ranked:</b> Search engines rank the page well <b>Organic first-time visitors:</b> It attracts more new users <b>Snippet selected:</b> Question, answered
<b>Scannable</b>	<b>F-Scan:</b> Standout text in scanning hot zone <b>Headlines &amp; Subheads:</b> Create meaning on their own
<b>Readable</b>	<b>Grade level:</b> Appropriate for audience <b>Length:</b> Right for task, measured by eye-tracking studies, heat maps, time on page <b>On brand:</b> Expresses your brand <b>Accessible:</b> No matter how they access the web, users can consume content
<b>Moving</b>	<b>Persuasive:</b> Users take desired actions (measured by conversions) <b>Journey continues:</b> Users stay on your site, click through to other pages
<b>Functional</b>	<b>Content ecosystem:</b> CMS, social media, campaigns, etc. <b>Current:</b> Up-to-date and correct information

### Hook readers with information they can't find elsewhere.

The public relations method of delivering the news in a few paragraphs followed by quotes from your top leaders, followed by information about the topic or your organization are out. So is the inverted pyramid, where the timely news is at the top, followed in descending order by less important facts.

Delivering news that people want to read and share is about telling a story. Make the reader feel like they know the person or were at the event or location you are writing about. Give them that feeling of FOMO (fear of missing out), and you will leave them wanting more. Don't talk to the reader, have a conversation with them; really draw them in.

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This can be achieved by digging deeper or finding a new angle than the typical “5 Ws and H” method of writing – who, what, when, where, why and how. Ask yourself: Why am I writing this, and what information will make it unique or memorable.

Depending on your institution or organization, its size and the news it’s delivering, your needs will change. For example:

- **A small, private institution** will want to find the people, programs and experiences that students can’t get anywhere else to tell its story.
- **A community college** will want to showcase immediate outcomes and its flexibility in obtaining degrees and certifications.
- **A research university or campus with multiple locations** may lean more toward traditional news or public relations through appointments, monetary announcements and discoveries. These can still often be told in a storytelling and humanistic capacity.

## ▶ RELATED READING: 7 Ways to Harness the Power of Storytelling

### Provide a mix of timely and evergreen stories.

Beyond reshaping news into stories, provide a mix of timely information with evergreen, or not-time-sensitive, information that won’t change or need to be updated to stay accurate.

Consider adding evergreen content into your editorial plan. Benefits include that it:


- **Doesn’t need to be updated** to be accurate
- **Can be prepared at any time** and posted as a need arises
- Can use SEO and web traffic to **help with page ranking** as it builds over time

This timeliness-not-trendy content should be updated to stay current, it shouldn’t be used for information that occurred at a point in time or has a short shelf life.

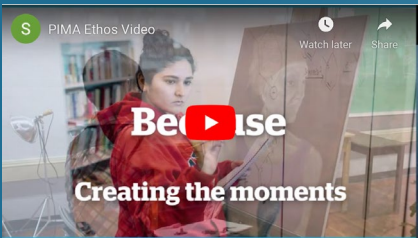
The right mix of timely vs. evergreen content will depend on your audience and organizational goals, so do an audit of content and how it’s being received to see how you can optimize and plan for the future.

### Create different forms of content.

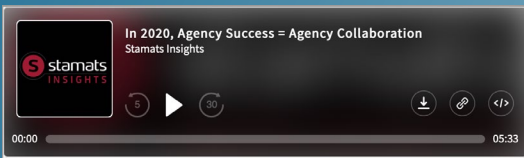
Not all stories lend themselves to be presented in the same way, and a story could possibly be told well in more than one communication method. Content can include:



**Written:** Article, e-book, blog



**Visual:** Photos, video, infographic



**Audio:** Podcast, quote, bonus content, more information

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Mix up how you are presenting your stories to your audiences. If sound or sight add to the experience, don't simply write what is happening, but capture and include audio or an image. Or, better yet, use multiple pieces to tell a story. Some ways this can be done include:

- In a written blog post, insert an interesting quote or sound bite
- On social media posting a compelling quote and headshot, photo slideshow, short video or even animated GIF linking to the full story or as a standalone element
- Publishing a photo gallery with a podcast talking about the images

Help your audience get the full experience and feel like they are in the story, rather than just reading information.

 **RELATED READING: 3 Ways to Create Memorable Content According to a Neuroscientist**

## Organize your stories with an editorial calendar.

To ensure you have a good mix of content, and to track how each type is resonating with your audiences on the correct platforms, use an editorial calendar.

To accurately monitor your stories, consider tracking:

- What type of content it is (news, profile, evergreen, event, etc.)
- The form the content took
- Where it was posted and when, how it was used
- The content subject, keywords or categories
- Analytics

Once you start keeping track of this information, you will have the visibility and data to create stories that resonate with your audience.

## Make Recurring Events or Topics Unique

Covering recurring events or topics can be a challenge, as the basic information about it might not change, even if it's important for your audience to know. Pull out the unique aspects specific to this piece of content and be strategic about getting your audiences to see it.

## Find the unique angle or aspect of the story.

Define the content's goal, and what makes it different than every other time it happens or has been covered in the past. Is there anything in the news that will tie current events to the item? Does someone associated with it have a compelling story, background or experience that can be told, with a mention of the event or topic in a paragraph at the end?

Don't ignore the headline. Even if you are covering an annual event, don't write it in a way that it could work for that event at any time. Pull out a unique aspect that likely won't be repeated to give a fresh spin on the item.

 **RELATED READING: How to Find Good Stories in Healthcare**



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## Properly place your content for visibility.

Get the most out of your story by using the fact that it's an event or topic that has been previously covered. We like to call it using the "web juice" of a previous high-performing article to help get readers to a new piece.

Because an older URL about the recurring event has been published longer, it could have a lot of traffic and search engine results, meaning it ranks high in a web search. This can make it difficult for the newer piece of content to show up high on page 1 of search results. Instead of trying to compete against a similar article on your site, use the web juice to drive people to the new content.

This can be done a few different ways, depending on your goal for the content, how outdated other content is and how previous content has performed:

- **Link between** the older, high-performing, similar content and the new information
- Publish the new information on the **same URL**, either by overwriting previous content or adding the new information on top, and separating them in some way (for example, by year if it's a yearly event)
- **Archive** (but don't delete!) the old content, and redirect users to the new content

## Win With Emerging and Evolving Stories

When news or a situation occurs where your audience expects a response from you, time matters.

Before news happens, have a plan in place defining the process and people to respond quickly, how to adapt and what success looks like.

## Publish content quickly with Rapid News Response.

Whether you are performing damage control about or from your institution, or want to shine your subject-matter expertise on an emerging topic, time is of the essence. The key is to be quick to publish, providing accurate and authoritative information.

We call this approach Rapid News Response. It's about telling the news in a timely way that fits your institution's brand or personality, with stories first. Frame the messaging in a way that provides unique, factual information that will set you apart from others in your industry.

Providing a strong narrative quickly will get your information in front of your audience – and possibly beyond. Your early authority will provide opportunities for earned media and placing high in search results. We've seen the difference with clients where speed provides significant spikes in traffic.

▶ **RELATED READING:** [How to Handle Crisis Communication Support and Strategy](#)

## Keep news up to date.

Emerging and evolving stories are rarely a "one and done" situation. Since this is timely information, make sure what you publish and share isn't outdated. Depending on how newsy the original information is and where in the cycle it was posted will determine how and when to check for updates.

Let your audience know when something was posted and how you will update. This can be done through adding a:

- **"Developing story"** disclaimer at the top of the web page
- **Time mark** stating when new information was added

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Consider adding a link to your alert bar or homepage, and highlight where followers can find information on your social media accounts.

If news isn't changing or doesn't need updating, make a note on your editorial calendar to revisit the content in the future; we recommend reviewing in one to three months depending on how newsy the topic is. Review if the content can be updated with more current information, or it can be rewritten to be evergreen.

## RELATED READING: Unfolding Lessons in the Wake of Crisis Management

### Create Content With the Web in Mind

At Stamats, we give cornerstone content new life: webinar content might become syndicated digital articles, a podcast, email content, social media posts or all of these. It then becomes part of our overall editorial calendar and marketing plan through strategic distribution across all channels.

When deciding how to create and present content, consider:

- **The audience**, and your goal or action for the content
- **Where the content will live.** Different sites or layouts will require different pieces of information to convey the story.
- **How your followers use that platform.** Look at any data and analytics like time on page, device they are using or how they are interacting with the website.

This will help you determine what content to create, and how best it should be presented.

Be sure to include a date when the content was created or last updated so readers understand how fresh the information is.

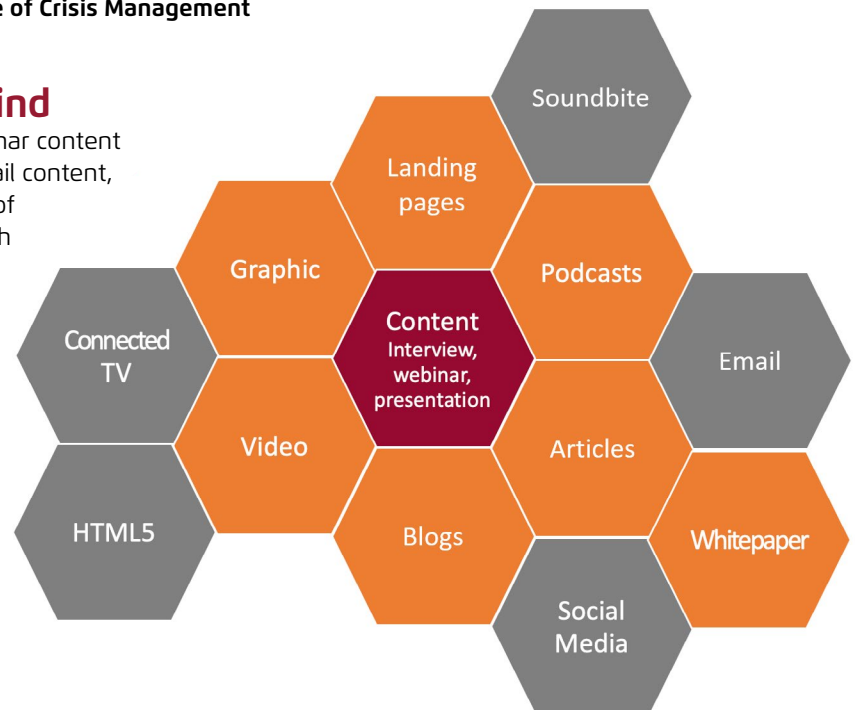
### Follow digital best practices.

Maximize impact and effectiveness of your content for mobile users by making it clear, concise and adhere to digital best practices.

Aim for at least two grade levels below your average user's reading level. Mobile devices can make it more difficult to comprehend information, and these users tend to scan rather than read.

Assume the person consuming your content will scan, rather than read. These people scroll to find what they are looking for or what catches their eye more than reading every word.

Their habits are to rapidly look around the page. To grab them, make sure the key information is visually called out, and the content is structured to attract attention.



### Readability Best Practices

- **Grade level:** 7th to 9th grade
- **Flesch Reading Ease score:** 70, give or take about 10 points
- **View readability statistics** in Microsoft Word (in the spell check box)
- **Other tools** can measure readability (app.readable.com, IELTS, SiteImprove, etc.)

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To set stories up for success:

**Make your headlines and subheads count.** Put specific, substantive language into your headlines and subheads. This cues the reader to the topic. Best practices include:

- **Only one H1 per page**, which is the primary headline for the page
- **Use descending H-tags** (from H2 as far down as H6) to create a logical outline of content through subheads
- **About 3 to 7 words long**
- **Heads and subheads work together as a unit**, including parallel construction

**Break your copy into small chunks.** Web users don't like to read long pages, yet we want to read more when we're considering a complex decision, like education. Work around this paradox by presenting all content in small, digestible chunks – even, or especially, the longer pages and more complex topics. Do this with:

- **One idea per paragraph**
- **40 to 50 words** max per paragraph
- **Subheads** sprinkled throughout
- **Lists** of 3 to 7 items

**Frontload key information.** Put the most important information you want users to see at the beginning of the sentence or bullet points.

## Define a consistent voice and style.

Ensure your content sounds cohesive by developing and using a consistent voice and style in communication, no matter the topic, department or author.

Voice and tone can adapt for context, but must still sound like it comes from your institution or organization. Define and document your voice and tone. Include writing samples of how you want your institution portrayed. Consider how active the language is, and if writing will be in first-, second- or third-person.

Additionally, having both a brand-specific style guide and a hierarchy of what guides or manuals to follow with ensure style is consistent across all content.

Above all else, clarity in writing should prevail over cleverness.

## Move users along with useful and reusable content.

Once your reader is on your site and in the story, have a plan to keep them engaged. Make it easy for them to find related information or take an action.

**Link content of similar topics via categories.** Define in your style guide what categories you will use, and stick to them. People can click the category to find similar content, or information from a certain category could be pulled into other parts of the website.

**Use dynamic content to show news stories in their proper context to services or programs.** Dynamic content is content that changes and is pulled into parts of a website based on data (such as what category it's marked as) or user behavior.

## Measure Your Calls-to-Action

Use tools to measure and monitor the effectiveness of your CTAs. These include:

- Google Analytics
- Google Data Studio
- CMS tools
- Heat maps
- Recordings of user interaction on the page

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**Guide users to the next step with calls-to-action (CTAs).** Now that a visitor is on your page, think about moving them toward a goal. What do you want them to do next or what's their next natural step? Help users follow a path through CTAs specific to your next step, goal, campaign or page.

## Make your content findable with keywords.

Now that you are telling great stories, you want your readers to find them! Once your story is crafted, you are close to being finished. With a few thoughtful final steps, you can make your content more likely to be found and read.

Search Engine Optimization, or SEO, is the quest to make sure your content rises to the top of search engine results when someone searches for your page or similar content. Anyone writing copy for the web can make their content more likely to be found by understanding and applying some basic concepts.

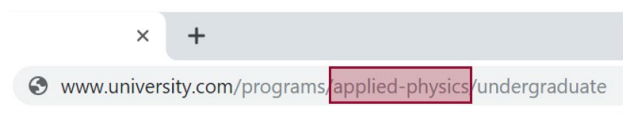
**Keywords are likely search terms.** When optimizing content, you want to use the same words or phrases your audience uses when it tries to find you. Those words and phrases are called keywords, and it's helpful to have a list of keywords before you begin writing.

**Use keywords in guiding text.** Guiding text includes headlines, subheads and links. When properly tagged, search engines can distinguish this copy from the words around it and the search engine will give more weight to keywords it finds in a headline, subhead or link.

**Make metadata count.** Metadata is hidden from users but exists in a web page's code to give instructions to the browser and to search engines. Search engines use metadata to deliver your page to the people searching for it. Use your targeted words and phrases (keywords) in your copy and in the metadata.

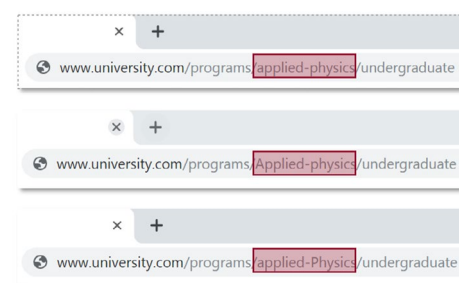
**Don't discard URL structure.** SEO best practice for URLs indicates the use of all lowercase letters, with words separated by slashes and hyphens. Limit connecting words such as for, and, the, of, etc., to improve navigability.

### Do this:



- Keep it short. Ideally, a URL should be less than 90 characters in length.
- Be descriptive in the URL to give the user an idea of what the page is about before they click on it.
- Keywords in the URL can increase your rank for search engines, but repeating a keyword multiple times can result in a decreased rank.
- Hyphens should be used to separate words in a URL.

### Avoid this:



- Case sensitive URLs that allow for uppercase and lowercase characters will be seen by Google as separate pages. To avoid this, always double-check that the page URL is all lowercase.
- These will be seen by Google as three separate pages.

## Keyword Research Resources

- **Google Trends** (<https://trends.google.com>) allows you to see keyword information like popularity, if it's trending up or down, and related keywords.
- **Google search bar** ([google.com](https://www.google.com)) populates with predictive text as you type. Here, you can see what people are searching for and write to provide information.
- **Paid services**, like Moz, SEMRush, Ubersuggest, Ahrefs and more. Some of these offer at no charge a limited number of keywords or amount of information.



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## When to Archive News

There might come a time it makes sense to clean up your news section, and archive some of your stories. Before you begin, conduct a content audit and create a plan for the content and URLs.

### Run a content audit of your news stories.

Start by creating an inventory of what content you have. This can be as simple as creating a spreadsheet with columns for:

- URL
- Post title
- Date published (or updated)
- Total page views
- Other helpful information to determine what to keep (time on page, bounce rate, category, page status, URL redirect, etc.)

Once your spreadsheet is populated, consider another column for content status. We recommend looking at deleting the content, writing new content in the existing URL, revising what is written, optimizing for a digital-first experience or leaving it as-is.

Consider keeping older, high-performing content, as that brings people to your site. Link to related content or more current versions of the same information to guide readers, or update the information within the current URL. Update or archive inaccurate or outdated content so people aren't finding incorrect information.

### Redirect readers from archived URLs.

If archiving news stories, determine where readers who have that page's URL should be directed. Perhaps everything goes to the news landing page or to a related piece of content. Consider adding a column in the spreadsheet tracking redirect links.

 **RELATED PODCAST:** [How to Audit Your Content In House](#)

## Showcase Your Stories: Stamats Can Help

Everyone has a story to tell, the key is finding the unique, individual stories to showcase.

At Stamats, we know writing. Our award-winning writing staff includes former journalists trained to spot and respond to breaking and emerging news. Our writing staff works alongside a digital team of strategists certified on multiple platforms to ensure we are infusing data and analytics into our content practice.

We solve clients challenges by providing various writing services and training, including workshops on writing for the web, Rapid News Response writing, blogging, social media and more. **[Learn about Stamats' capabilities.](#)**

## About Stamats

A privately held company based in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, Stamats Communications provides a complete range of services including media, content marketing, live events, email, research, consulting and database marketing. Stamats was founded in 1923 and maintains offices at its headquarters in Cedar Rapids and in Minneapolis.

**Contact Stamats** to learn how we can help you create content that resonates with your audience.

