

Kevin P Nichols' All Things Content.

Episode 1: Content Audits and Inventories with Paula Land

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SPEAKERS

Paula Land, Kevin P Nichols, Voice Over

Voice Over 00:01

You're listening to all things content from Avenue CX delivering you cutting edge insights into the past, present, and future of all topics related to content. Here's your host, Kevin P Nichols.

Kevin P Nichols 00:17

Good morning, everybody. I'm Kevin P Nichols, and welcome to my podcast. I'm super excited today. Today we are joined with Paula Land, a very good friend of mine and an expert in I think all things content and digital, for that matter, Paula and I go way back. But before we begin, let me give a quick introduction. She's the founder and principal content strategist of First of all, she founded Strategic Content, which was her company. She's also an author of a book entitled The Content Inventory and Audit handbook, which, by the way, is one of the few books that I use on an ongoing basis as a reference book. She wrote it a few years ago, but it's still highly, highly valuable. And I use it pretty much on most of the projects that I engage with that need or involve content audits, or inventories, which is what we're going to be talking to her about today. And we're going to flash that up on the screen so you can actually see the book and you know where you can get that. She's also a guest lecturer at the University of Washington Information School. In addition to all of that she's a member of the Content Strategy Alliance, Best Practices initiative. And also, she works at NASA, so you can't have a more cool job than that. So welcome, Paula. We're really excited to have you here today.

Paula Land 01:45

Thanks, Kevin. Excited to be here. And to talk about my favorite topic.

Kevin P Nichols 01:53

I don't even remember when we met for the first time, but we've known each other for several years. It probably was at a conference of in San Francisco or Seattle or someplace.

Paula Land 02:08

Yeah, I think it was at a conference. I think it may have been at Confab.

Kevin P Nichols 02:13

Yeah, perhaps or maybe even before then, I don't I don't know exactly. Oh, and you did have the content audit tool, which used to be I was saddened that it, I know that you had sold it, or you had sold that tool, but I was saddened to see that it's no longer in existence, because that used to be one of my favorite tools. And I know that you invented that tool, so rest in peace content audit tool. So, getting to what we are here to talk about today, which is content audits and inventories, because you really are one of the foremost experts of this in the entire world. And again, I could not recommend your book on this more. Just recently, it came across my desk that the Wall Street Journal conducted a content well, an audit of its content and its coverage of its paper. And it's obviously a newspaper. But it was fairly interesting. The New York Times ran a story on this recently. And they said that there were specific recommendations that came out of that audit, that were around topics. And they recommended in this audit that stories incorporate more featured content on wellness and diversity, to attract a broader audience. And if they wanted to diversify their subscription, and their membership in their audiences in the way that they needed to in order to improve revenue, and to increase sales, that they really needed to think about the actual topics of the content and the appeal of those topics to a broader audience. Now, I think according to The New York Times, that audit was actually shelved. I don't know if the recommendations are actually being followed. So, I wanted to start there as a topic because I think it's interesting, and it's coming from the publishing industry or the newspaper industry, but where I wanted to start with this, audits are often political, even if they're done for a website. They're often messy, and they also bring all sorts of considerations that you probably don't think are necessarily going to even materialize. When you begin the process of doing one. What are some of the biggest unforeseen challenges you've encountered? Paula, when you were working on an audit or an inventory in your experience.

Paula Land 04:40

Well, I think you kind of hit on it there with them being sort of political and messy. I think too, it may surprise people that I think the hardest aspect of doing an audit is not the actual process of doing an audit. It's the upfront Buy in, it's getting that clear and well communicated mandate to actually do the project. And I say well communicated, because what can happen is that if everyone who is either going to participate in the audience, audit or have some of their, they are stakeholders, and some of their content is going to be part of the audit, if they are not on board, then you can end up with something like it sounds like, like the Wall Street Journal did, right, which is, you can go through a whole process of doing this work. But if you don't have that buy in, if you don't have a sort of corresponding commitment to actually using the results of the audit, then your audit may just end up on a shelf. And in the meantime, you may have actually damaged, or had some had some difficult or, or messy situations or conversations with your stakeholders. So to me that political aspect, that communication aspect to that up front, making sure that everyone knows why you're doing it, what you're planting, planting to get out of it, making sure that everyone is committed to being open minded about what comes out of it,

because one of the one of the challenges is, you are often auditing content created by various groups around an organization, and some of them may be maybe very open to hearing, hearing your evaluation, that content and some may not. And that if you are kind of in the awkward position of being the content strategist who is having to sort of fight those, those battles, or bring those people on board, that can be really, it can be really difficult, it's a difficult position to be in. So I, would strongly recommend, and certainly try in my own contexts, to make sure that I have that sort of organizational mandate and support so that there is sort of a, a, escalation process or there is, there's a way to, just make sure that, it's not all sort of falling on me, and I'm not sort of the bad guy for telling people that, their baby is ugly.

Kevin P Nichols 07:23

And what happens, like, it sounds like what perhaps happened in the Wall Street Journal cases that they got news that they may not want to hear, right, like, right, they were perhaps told that, that they were creating stories for, and it wasn't all, like, what some people might think, well, it's the political slant, or that sort of thing. It actually some of what I read, the issue was, was that it was skewing to. It was skewing to a demographic, and a generation that was older. And they needed to appeal to younger audiences with certain types of topics and that sort of thing. So, one of the things that the Wall Street Journal does is it focuses a lot on financial, right? But there may not be if they want to increase their revenue, or they need to increase the revenue. I'm not saying this is the case. But it could be that there's not enough demand out there to support that. And so, they need to open-up for additional topics in order to bring in more of an audience. Right, right. So, what happens when you hit that type of an issue where you're telling somebody that your entire editorial strategy has to shift or be changed based on what you're uncovering?

Paula Land 08:44

Well, kind of goes back to all of that context setting up front that I just can't emphasize enough, right. So, what it sounds like, may have happened there is they didn't know or they, they may have a different idea of whom they want to be, than what their audiences want from them. Right. And so, there's, there's a sort of disconnect, where if you're auditing and don't realize that, I mean, again, if you're auditing for people who are not going to be open to hearing that, then something, something was missed up front, right. And, and part of that is spending the time to do stakeholder interviews, if necessary, look at look at business goals, look at audiences look at trends, right? If, if they were able, if the auditors were able to have that as their context, and then go back and say, look, this is what we're seeing, demographically, your readership is starting to, age out of this or, we want to if you really want to remain viable, you need to start to appeal to a younger audience, and that's what we're going to be, that's we're going to be looking for and that's our recommendations are gonna be Based on that, if you don't want to hear that, if you don't want to expand your business or reach new audiences, then don't bother, right? you've got to, you've got to kind of have that, that willingness to be really, I mean, I hate to use the word vulnerable, but I mean it, but I kind of mean that, right? That that business or an organization needs to be able to hear that, you're kind of missing the mark here. Or, or if you don't kind of change course, you're, you're eventually going to miss that mark. And, what, I'm what I'm trying to do, what my, as a as an auditor is, I'm trying to tell you, here's where I see you kind of going off that path, or here's where I see, where there could be improvements, or, I see opportunities, based on, what I know about your audience and those demographics, and that kind of brings me to another, element of,

that sort of upfront context setting is, besides knowing what the organization exists to do, or what the business exists to sell, understanding everything you can about who their current customer base, or who their current audience is, looking at whatever user research you have looking at things like analytics, just to see what people are, are engaging with now. But then you also must think about, is that your ideal audience? Or do you want to? Do you want to expand that audience? Do you want to prioritize one audience over another? I mean, most, most businesses, most publications have multiple audiences, and they may have some that are higher priority than others. And so, if for The Wall Street Journal, their highest priority audience, are the people interested in financial news, then that's, that gives you a certain, that gives you a certain lens through which to audit the content. But if they say, that's, that's a priority audience, but we also want to, reach more of, say, a lifestyle audience, then, what does that mean, in terms of how you scope, the audit, what you look at what criteria you set, and so on?

Kevin P Nichols 12:09

Yeah, I think, one thing, I mean, there's a lot to unpack there, I think one thing that your book and that you've really taught me, over the years is that audits are really need to be built into sort of the DNA of a business culture for, like, thinking of it in terms of almost like, the performance audit of personnel, but it's for the content, right? Like, you've got to think of like looking at your content on an ongoing basis. And in the web industry, when we first started doing content audits and inventories, I think a lot of us thought of it as this is the beginning of the process for a web redesign, and we look at the current state to see what exists, and then that'll tell us, what we need to build. And that's not at all really how you approach an audit, like you're approaching it much more from the standpoint of the business strategy, and auditing content against the business strategy and the consumer needs. And figuring out where the content can evolve, and what is successful within that content experience. And that, I think, is fundamentally what you've taught me and what your book, for example, taught me about harnessing the power of content audits.

Paula Land 13:30

Yeah, and to be clear, I mean, you can do audits for various reasons. I mean, you may also do an audit, that's purely you, you're changing something about your branding, or you just want to make sure that that all of your content is on brand. So you're not necessarily I mean, that obviously kind of ladders up to, to who you are as a business and how you want to present yourself and who your audience is, but, but that's kind of a different, potentially a different scope than really kind of having a real kind of business value focused, you could also audit in the context of doing a content re-platform, right, you may not be doing anything else, but moving your content from one platform to another, a new content management system or something. So, so you may audit in that scenario, you'd kind of look at different things. And in that case, maybe you're not doing a sort of qualitative audit, per se, but you're looking for things like, what are the what are the what are all of our content types and our contract models and, what are what are some of the, the content features that we need to make sure, work in the new system and so on. But I think, what, you and I are kind of mostly talking about here are those sort of real qualitative audits in the context of, as you say, like a redesign or, or, again, the, the kind of ongoing I mean, the rolling audit, as something that you sort of adopt as part of your kind of own overall performance tracking or the KPIs, you track to as a business, if you know auditing your content to make sure that your content is meeting, those specific goals, and you can map those goals to, specific

qualities or metrics about your content, then, doing that kind of rolling audit, whatever, whatever frequency makes sense to you, I mean, if you're a huge organization, you might not be able to do something like that, every year or, every six months, or whatever, I think it really kind of depends on, resources and in timing, and how frequently your content changes, or how frequently your business changes, but, but definitely, an audit is ideally not a one and done thing, it, in fact, you should get better at it over time, the first one, you're going to kind of hit some snags, probably realize that you didn't select the right criteria, or you didn't define them well enough for you had some of those, organizational issues, the second time, hopefully, you kind of do a little better job with those things. But if you get it, installed as a regular practice within your organization, and it just becomes something that everyone understands will happen on some schedule. it just not only obviously, does it, make sure that you're regularly kind of weeding out your content, making sure it's, it's doing its job, but you're also kind of establishing a quality kind of mindset in your organization. And if everyone is aware that you can't just sort of throw this stuff up there on the website, and it's never going to get looked at again, or no one's ever going to question whether it's, whether it's still relevant, or it's still accurate. You know that that kind of seeps its way into your overall, just kind of governance and, and site maintenance.

Kevin P Nichols 17:12

Yeah, and your ongoing content planning and editorial, strategy,

Paula Land 17:19

I think, absolutely. I'm sorry.

Kevin P Nichols 17:22

I think one thing that is also, I mean, one question I wanted to ask you is, do you think that content ecosystems and companies can be healthy and successful without ongoing audits?

Paula Land 17:37

Well, obviously, I'm a little bit biased here, but I kind of think, but I tend to think no, right? Because, just what we're saying here, that, if you are not, if you're kind of just literally never reviewing your content, you're in danger of ending up with, outdated and accurate, off brand content, content that isn't supporting your users' needs, and eventually, that kind of comes home to roost, and it's gonna hurt your business. without, without those learnings, as you mentioned to that, there is the audit to find the things to fix, but there is also the audit to find gaps, and to find opportunities, right. So it's, it's not just, here are all the things that are wrong with our site, it's like, here's an area we could build on, here is content, that's, that's really good, and is doing really well, or users are engaging with it, and it really is supporting a business need, it's driving people to a purchase or, whatever your conversion goals are. So then, that's, that's an area to kind of, reinvest in or invest more in, and it kind of lets you, no organization has unlimited resources for managing and creating their content. So, you want to make sure that the content that you're creating and managing is the highest value that can be and so, if you're not ever auditing it, you're missing that opportunity as well. And then, this kind of goes along to with sort of the benefits of the audit, as I mentioned before, kind of building in that culture of, culture of quality culture of sort of accountability for content. An output of an audit can and should also be some learnings that get fed into, you're kind of planning, like we just said, but also updates to your style guides or, your governance policies or revisit workflows, what, what caused that content to not be quite

as good as it could have been to begin with, how can you make sure that doesn't happen going forward? Because, again, limited resources, you want to make sure you're, you're actually applying those resources as effectively as possible. So, if you come out of an audit without any learnings, I would be very surprised. I mean, any organization it's going to come out of that going okay, well if you know is 20% of our content isn't really can't really map this to any business goal, we can't map it to a step in a customer journey, we can't, show that it's helping users complete a task, then why are we managing it? Right, may not even be bad content, per se. But that gives you, gives you a direction, when you start to identify those patterns.

Kevin P Nichols 20:24

And so, in terms of thinking through the audit, right, like, because just unpacking that a little bit. And there's a lot to think through. How do you do? Like, how do you and I know you've wrote a whole book on it, and I know that this is more than just a 30-minute conversation. But there's a lot of organizations out there that aren't doing this. And we know that if you really want a healthy content ecosystem, if you want a performance driven one, if you want one that's standing your content for continued success to stand it up. So that content is an actual asset that can be quantified and measured and all that within your organization, you must audit that content, and put mechanisms in place to evaluate its performance. But if you're not doing that, what would be your advice, for some key ingredients to start thinking through how to how to put that into place?

Paula Land 21:26

But kind of, again, just goes back to, maybe even higher than anything else, what are our goals? It is sort of what does, what does our content need to do? What role does our content play--whether it's a website, or whatever else, but we often tend to focus on websites here--but what role does that play in our business? in helping us to meet our business goals? And, where? Also, what are those goals? What are those objectives? Again, kind of what's, what's the user, who our audiences are, what do they need? And, and so again, I kind of keep coming back to this point, but understanding that stuff up front, having that context! What's triggering this audit, are we deciding to audit because we're seeing that, our PR sales are down, or, our donations are down, or our analytics are showing that our traffic's dropping off, or, whatever it might be, or you just have a sense that things feel outdated; we haven't updated this content in a while. Whatever triggers it, the audit, being really clear about that up front, because that's going to help you scope it, and it's going to help you set your goals and help you set your criteria. So, once you've kind of immersed yourself a bit in that like, why are we doing this? what are the opportunities here, and this might be a way to kind of get that organizational buy in, which is to be able to say, look, here's this, here's this current state, and here's some, here's some issues; or here's some areas we want to kind of focus on or address, Let's kind of baseline this, and then we'll be able to show, how we can improve this. And that, that gets to something a little further down the line, but that is sort of: how do you act on it? And how do you measure sort of the success of having done all this, but then it gets kind of back to set the context, understand everything you can about the business, what it's trying to do? Or understand the organization, understand your users everything that they want a need and are doing, and what you want them to be doing? Because these could be two different things. And then, then based on that, that's when you create your criteria. So, what are the really specific points against which we're going to measure this content? A qualitative audit is often kind of focused on things like editorial quality, and use of language, tone of voice, that kind of thing. Also, is the content

accurate? Is the content current? But as I said, you could also be checking it against a business goal. For example, if you had a set of three or four KPIs, business KPIs that you're tracking--which one of these does it support? It could also be a step in the customer journey or so on. So, getting all that up front, then you decide what are those things that we are going to audit against?

And then I think one of the biggest problems in auditing, particularly if you're doing it with other people, so if you if you've got a team doing it is not being clear enough about those criteria. So not defining them well enough, that not only even if you're doing it yourself, but you also know and might refer back to it later. You need to know exactly how you defined whether a piece of content met a particular criterion. And all the more important if you have a bunch of people working on it, because this is subjective. I mean, one person's bad is another person's: "Well, it's okay." So, if you have this really clearly defined and then say, your marking, you've chosen a rubric like good, fair and poor based upon a particular criteria, what does it mean to be good? How would you identify that? What specific things would you look for in that content? It might be something like, just say, its editorial be like, well written, so there are no grammatical errors, no typographical errors, and so forth. So, so you kind of have really specific things: what does it mean, to say, it's fair, what does it mean to say it's poor, so you try to take as much of that subjectivity out as you can. But it's always going to be a little bit subjective, but that that kind of future proofs it a little bit in terms of when you actually are done with this whole process, and then because this could take weeks to complete, it could take months. Depending on how large the content set is and how much time people have to devote to it. So, if you're returning to that later, you want to make sure you know exactly what those map because otherwise you kind of in a position of essentially redoing the audit, because now you don't remember all the decisions you made while evaluating specific content: Why did I say that piece of content was only fair. And then just as kind of a side note to that, if you are doing an audit with multiple stakeholders, and I've had this experience, do not, if possible, allow them to audit their own content. Have them audit content they have not written or content they are not responsible for.

Kevin P Nichols 26:44

It's great.

Paula Land 26:45

Exactly, exactly.

Kevin P Nichols 26:48

It's the best prose I've ever seen, at least in my mind!

*laughter

Paula Land 26:51

Exactly. And, and some people, that's a generalization, obviously, and you have to kind of take the temperature in your organization of how people are going to feel about this. But, if they're excited about it, and have been brought on board early on, and understand why you're doing it, and what could come out of it, and the benefit of doing this, and they're willing to be really, really sort of self-critical. Then it can work to have them audit their own, But if you were having some of the people who created that

content look at their own stuff, it can be it can be a challenge, and it's human nature, right, you're going to be a little defensive of something you created.

Kevin P Nichols 27:28

Do you extend that? And I'm sorry, to cut you off there, but I think we want to clarify this... Uh, what do you extend that too? So, there's "creator" and there is creator, right? So, do you extend that to: don't have a company audit its own website? I mean, in an ideal setting, should they bring in an independent expert to come in?

Paula Land 27:50

I think there are arguments both ways, but I, but I do think, especially and maybe this, this reflects my experience of having done 12 years or so of consulting, coming in as an outsider gives you a couple of advantages. I mean, one obvious one is that you don't have those, those attachments to the content that the people in house have, and you don't have necessarily the political issues, you've been brought in, presumably everyone understands, we have hired this consultant who is going to come do this, get on board. So, theoretically, you don't have as many of those challenges to fight, although I will say, I have often been in the position of working kind of being caught between, let's say warring, but, different factions within a company who really have different, have different priorities and have different, different goals, or expectations or whatever. So, so that can be a challenge, but I do think, there is something, coming in and having that objective experience, people are often more open to hearing criticism from an outsider than from the person the next cubicle over or the next office over or whatever it's it, it kind of takes away some of that internal, that internal conflict, and, you really are looking at it with fresh eyes, you don't have the, oh, we put that up there. Because so and so requested it, and, that person was, the Vice President, and we kind of couldn't say, No, that wasn't a good piece of content or whatever, you don't have any of that, you're coming in just saying, that's not a good piece of content, you don't need it. Um, so there's that I mean, by "the internal." The benefit I suppose of doing it as an internal person is that you have ongoing learning, right, which is we're doing this audit now. But we're, we're gonna learn from it, we're gonna, we're going to build what we've learned from it into our processes and into our guides and so on. But also, again, kind of that what I was talking about before, it's sort of creating this kind of culture of ongoing analysis and improvement, and dedication to content quality, that, that that's something that a consultant may come in, deliver some, some results and go away. And, that doesn't necessarily mean that the people internally have sort of really, internalized all that and built it out, which, which actually brings me to a whole other thing, which is, again, one of the problems of, of potential problems of doing it as an outsider is, quite often a project is scoped to the delivery of an audit, it's not scoped to the actual implementation of the results of an audit, and that is left to the people in house. And so, if they were totally on board with it, and they are excited about it, and they're ready to go, that's great. If they were not on board with it, or suddenly they do not have time or something shifted, or some other big project is kind of reared up its head, then that audit might sit there on the shelf.

Kevin P Nichols 31:26

Right? Or they don't like... Actually you're right, you're right. I was going to say: or they don't like what the learnings are, so they decide to ignore them and keep it as is.

Paula Land 31:37

Like the Wall Street Journal.

*laughter

Kevin P Nichols 31:40

We're assuming that that's the case

Paula Land 31:42

But you're right, exactly-yeah. My apologies. If that's not the case.

Kevin P Nichols 31:47

I mean, it's sometimes that's the case, but it's because they don't want to invest in them. I mean, it could very well be that the amount of operational or capacity overhaul that's required to support such changes is cost-prohibitive, or something like this. And, and it's maybe short-term, maybe in the short term, it means that they have to hire up a bunch of journalists in their case too, to write, and particularly subjects that require subject matter expertise. Who knows? But, um, yeah, no, this is great. Um, I bet you also probably have all sorts of interesting little I know, you do. Horror stories that you could give us in terms of like, some of the worst-case scenarios that you've seen in terms of content, but I'm not gonna ask, instead, I'm not going to ask you to tell me where the bodies are buried or give me clients. But what I would love is just any, any kind of guidance of things that, if you could go back and do things like, differently, what are some of the best practices that you've learned over the years? Sort of the hard way? Like, what are some lessons learned that you would, take moving forward and say, Okay, here's things that I've learned, and you can use to sort of inform your approaching this and doing this.

Paula Land 33:27

Yeah, I guess, I'll be a little bit of a broken record here. But I think, I think the biggest learning is, preparation and, and really having a plan for it. I mean, it's not, it should not be just sort of, this task that happens over to the side, I mean, it really should be kind of positioned within the larger context of, keeping your keeping your business, keeping your content relevant and doing what it's supposed to be doing. And, and you can't, you can't just kind of drop in and do an audit without really understanding all of that. And I think the times that I have personally struggled with audits, it's been because, there...there just wasn't enough, I didn't understand enough of the business context. And so maybe, in retrospect, I would have looked at different things, I would have audited for different criteria. So, the more the more of that upfront, the more of that upfront work you can do, just to make sure, because whether you're a consultant or in house, again, you never have not only do you not have unlimited time to do these things, but you want to you want to take action relatively quickly, usually I mean: websites evolve, during the time that you're doing an audit, there could be, however many, a few to a dozen or 100 new pieces of content, whatever posted to that site. And so, dragging it out for too long and having to go back and re audit or kind of rethink it, if you've sort of delivered results that people, it wasn't what people expected or wasn't something that people can actually take action on, you've, you've kind of wasted everyone's time and you've wasted some opportunity there. So, so all of that upfront work just to, prepare for the, for the process and prepare the organization for the process, prepare the organization to know that, there, there will be some expectation from you, when this is over, there will

be this is, this is not the work, this is the preparation for the work, and it's going to guide the work. And so, without that, again, without that sort of having that really well understood up front, then you're potentially in that position of delivering something that doesn't do what it needs to do. And so that really is a bit of my sort of drumbeat.

Kevin P Nichols 36:04

I love it. This is not the work. This is the preparation for the work. Paula Land, everybody, and the book is: Content Inventory and Audit Handbook, it's available at Amazon. And remember, there is a what I like to say is a special place in hell for those of you that have independent bookstores in your backyard and don't get the book there. But anyway, her book is released by XML Press. It has been lovely speaking with you today. Paula, thank you so much for joining us. Thank you!

Paula Land 36:38

Kevin. This was fun. It was really fun.

Kevin P Nichols 36:41

And we will welcome you back. Thanks a lot, everybody. Have a great day, Paula, and thanks for tuning in. Thanks.

Voice Over 36:50

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