Introduction

This report aims to construct a strategic roadmap based on work my team and I have done for Client A. We were asked by Client A to conduct a content audit of their online training material as part of a planned refurbishment of their online material.

During the content audit we sampled 39 of Client A's online courses and evaluated them based on the client's areas of concern. We then produced a content assessment report which summarized our audit findings. The audit and content assessment report were completed and turned into the client on February 22nd.

In this report, I will analyze the findings of our content audit and recommend strategic directions for Client A to take in order to improve their online content management. These strategies will focus on alleviating the three major areas of concern identified in the audit: consistency, functionality, and accessibility. These issues, as well as Client A's strengths and the environmental factors of the online training market, will be elaborated on in the following SWOT section. Strategic recommendations will be outlined in the strategic roadmap section.

SWOT Analysis

This assessment has been produced after reviewing the content audit and competition research that was conducted for the content assessment report. Competitors' content could not be accessed, so information on their courses and content strategy had to be gathered from public sources. This means that a full comparison of content was not possible, however some conclusions could still be drawn.

Strengths

The main strength of Client A's course material is the substance of the content. Courses were almost always written in adherence with brand guidelines and met grammar, voice, and tone standards. In fact, grammar and tone were the two highest scoring categories. Accuracy was a client concern, but in our audit we found it was not an issue, those courses which referenced specific laws or regulations were kept up to date. We also found that most courses were well tailored for the target audience.

Even the courses with major functionality or presentation issues contained useful educational content, which meant that very few courses were recommended for archival in our audit.

Weaknesses

Our team identified three major weaknesses of the course material: consistency, functionality, and accessibility.

Inconsistency, particularly with visual design, video players, and interactive features, was one of the most prevalent issues with the sampled content. Only 2 of the 39 sampled courses had a visual layout which adhered to the brand guidelines given to us by the client. Several courses played in a different video player than was standard, an issue which we were specifically asked by the client to record in the audit. There were also occasional structural inconsistencies, usually with the introduction, and odd inconsistencies with interactive features. Although most users will not be viewing several different courses in close succession and therefore may not notice these inconsistencies, it is still better for courses to feel as if they have been made in the same way for branding and content quality purposes.

The functionality and accessibility issues compounded this problem. Several different interactive features did not work as intended, particularly quizzes. Audio quality was also categorized in our audit as a functionality issue, with 19 of the courses having some kind of audio issue. Efforts seem to have been made to improve accessibility, but none of the courses had closed captions, and although transcripts were standard 10 of the courses either did not have a transcript at all or the link to the transcript was broken.

These three issues in tandem could be particularly concerning when comparing Client A's content to Competitor A, which specifically markets their training material based on production quality and has captions on most content.

Opportunities

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many organizations have been transitioning from in-person operations to fully online or hybrid operations. This means that the demand for online services is increasing in most industries, including professional training. Competitor B, an online learning platform which we identified as a competitor to Client A, experienced a "three-fold increase in new registrations" (Wood) after the pandemic, although Wood also notes that online learning registration was rising before the pandemic as well. In a Forbes article, Fahim ul Haq discussed how online learning is particularly well suited for professional development because it is flexible, self-paced, and cost effective. This shift could present an opportunity for Client A to reach its niche market where they are.

Threats

The fact that Client A's content is tailored for local government officials means that there are relatively few other organizations in their specific niche. However, despite the opportunities offered by an expansion into online training, the online professional training market does have some significant competition which poses a threat to Client A's hold on their target audience.

Competitor A is not known for local government training, however it has a training package available specifically for government employees. Competitor B also has some topic overlap with Client A. Both these organizations have more experience with online training content than Client A does, which likely means a more streamlined content creation and delivery process, and fewer of the weaknesses we identified in our audit. While these organizations may not have the content that Client A's audience needs, they do have a marketing and technological advantage.

Organizations like Client A, which are targeted toward local government training but are not native to online training, are also taking advantage of the opportunity posed by a rise in demand for online training solutions. Competitor C and Competitor D are two examples. Both of these organizations have existing online training material and seem to be expanding their online programs in order to better meet their users' needs. If Client A is to commit to online learning, it would be prudent for them to keep up with or overtake these organizations in terms of content quality and usability.

Strategic Roadmap

Strategic suggestions will focus on resolving the consistency, functionality, and accessibility issues identified in the audit, and on maturing Client A's content management process based on JoAnn Hackos's Information Process Maturity Model (IPMM). The strategies detailed here will either help alleviate these issues or put devices in place to counter them in any material Client A releases in the future.

Based on Hackos's IPMM, I believe that Client A's handling of its online material is currently in the second level of content maturity. Stylistic standards have been established but are not always followed, and quality assurance procedures may be inefficient. This level of maturity was described by Hackos as a transitional period, the goal will be to enforce standardization practices and begin implementing procedures which will directly improve user experience.

Quality Assurance

Client A is making active steps toward improving in this area. As mentioned prior, the content audit we produced was a part of a planned refurbishment process for Client A's online material. During this process material will be updated, functionality issues will be fixed, and accessibility problems will hopefully be resolved.

However, based on the issues found in the audit, it may be also prudent to reinforce the standards that have been set in the style guide and potentially add some new quality standards specifically for Client A's online content creation process. To this end I recommend that Client A create a standard, documented procedure for developing digital course content and an accompanying template for the course material. The development procedure should include technology requirements and further accessibility standards, such as required closed captioning for all courses.

If used consistently by all developers, these materials will improve content quality and give developers who may not be used to creating digital content a standard to follow. Use of a template will ensure that style guide standards are always met and a documented development procedure will standardize course structure, audio quality, and other technical aspects of the courses.

The template will also allow for a degree of structural content reuse without significantly resource-intensive setup. Given the nature of Client A's material (educational, with not many repeating topics) and the current IPMM level, this is the extent of the content reuse that I recommend.

User Focus

Considering the needs of the user is particularly important for Client A. Although users most likely are not free to choose their training content, their supervisors need assurance that the content they pay to access is sufficient. Client A already collects quantitative user analytics data which can be used to inform the development of future courses. This will be valuable when the current refurbishment process is complete, and Client A begins producing new content. However,

Client A's current system for collecting user feedback is completely manual. Users must directly contact Client A's training coordinator or the learning management system's support staff if they have issues with a course, and there is no good way for a user to comment on a minor error or ask a question about course content.

Implementing a more structured user feedback process will allow Client A to take in concerns from users more efficiently and quickly address any functionality errors which may occur after the refurbishment process.

Information Design

Effective information design is also crucial to the success of Client A's training content. If information design is lacking, the user will not absorb the material well. For this purpose, conducting usability tests before launching a course may be useful to the client.

Hackos recommends this practice for organizations on the third level of the IPMM, so implementation of this tactic may be a stretch goal. However, I believe it may be appropriate for Client A because the effective structure of Client A's training material depends mostly on the application of pedagogical practices. Client A already has in-person training material in its catalogue, so it is likely that Client A's content developers already have a solid understanding of best practices for their material. As long as those best practices are communicated clearly to all involved parties, the goal then becomes ensuring that Client's information design tactics remain effective when translated to a digital medium and continue to be refined in future content.

Usability tests could be a powerful tool to meet these two goals by providing developers feedback on what works for users and what doesn't, particularly if the developers are not used to working with digital content. These tests will also add another layer of quality control to the development process and save time in the long run by identifying issues with a course before it is released to the public. There are potential obstacles to implementing this tactic, given Client A's industry it may not be possible to recruit actual users for these tests, and since usability tests are generally recommended for organizations with a higher content maturity level, Client A may not have the resources to spare. However, I believe the results that Client A can get from these tests will be valuable.

Conclusion

There are some limitations in my analysis. I was not provided significant insight into Client A's operations, so I was unable to make any significant strategic recommendations concerning Client A's employees, management, or operational procedures. There are likely strategies that would be helpful to Client A which I could not include in this report because I did not have enough data to do so. For example, it seems that there is room to improve communication and collaboration between Client A's development teams and content management teams, but I cannot know that for sure.

I also intentionally recommended an information design tactic which was recommended for organizations with a higher IPMM level. I believe, given the context, that this tactic is appropriate for Client A and a realistically implementable practice. However, Client A's online content management team may not have the resources to implement this tactic in the near future. All of these strategic recommendations are intended as goals to be reached for. This is why framing these strategies in terms of the IPMM is important because it emphasizes that any progress up the model is useful, even when it is gradual.

Client A has an opportunity to capitalize on shifting business practices. With its library of targeted content, it may have a foothold into a growing market. However, online professional development is also a crowded market, and Client A must minimize its current content weaknesses in order to be competitive. It has stark disadvantages against better known competitors who have already positioned themselves to provide the same online services as Client A. Despite these hurtles, Client A is taking active measures to improve its online content. Following any of the strategic paths laid out in this report will help in these endeavors.

References

Hackos, JoAnn. "Information Process Maturity Model." The Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, 2017

Haq, Fahim ul. "Council Post: Five Reasons Online Learning Is the Future of Professional Development." Forbes, Forbes Magazine, 26 Mar. 2021, https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbestechcouncil/2021/03/26/five-reasons-online-learning-is-the-future-of-professional-development/?sh=1a2f4d7dfc70.

Wood, Johnny. "These 3 Charts Show the Global Growth in Online Learning." World Economic Forum, https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/01/online-learning-courses-reskill-skills-gap/.