



Easy Editorial Calendars



Learn how to build a planning tool that works for your team to keep your content strategy alive long after launch.

A PRIMER FOR WEB CONTENT MANAGERS AND MARKETERS

Suite Seven
2355 Broadway #402
Oakland, CA 94612
510.292.4454
hello@suiteseven.com

On day one, everything is perfect ...

You've combed through every word of your beautiful new website, checked every link, and lovingly polished every sentence. You're ready to launch, and everything is perfect. Thousands of dollars and months of effort are about to pay off as you "flip the switch" on your company's new site. Your social media sites and a brand new email newsletter are not far behind. You are off and running.

But then the inevitable happens. Once the "box is checked" and the website has been up for a few weeks, it may be easy for teams to slip into bad habits. Your marketing teams may be out of practice thinking about the website as a communications channel. Or, just as much of a challenge, everybody across the company fights for real estate on the home page or for attention on the Twitter feed.

Before long, individual departments are starting their own social media channels or launching their own microsites because they don't see the corporate site as an ideal marketing platform. Yet the corporate website sits stale and untouched, because it is difficult to find sources of quality content — or the time to plan and implement it.

What's your plan for post-launch?

This phenomenon is what content strategy expert Jeff Macintyre refers to as the Day Two Problem. You've built a strategy for what your online content should do across your different platforms. You've crafted your messages with great care and woven together a lovely and convincing narrative across all your pages, with a definite idea of how you'd like to continue telling that story over time.

The problem is that you have no roadmap for doing it.

Leading up to your launch, you most likely had a detailed content plan: a spreadsheet that mapped out what each page would be about, who would write it, where the source content would come from, and what assets would be included. But many companies do not

think to put that kind of a plan in place for the long term, which means that once the site goes live, your content team is flying blind.

A house out of order

A boutique retailer of household goods, COZY, recognized their customers bought appliances and kitchen gear when they were inspired — by an interesting recipe, a seasonal favorite flavor, or ideas for quick and easy weeknight meals. As the company embarked on a long-overdue website redesign project, it invested in the development of a content strategy that laid out plans for more lifestyle-oriented content.



Within weeks after the site went live, however, the marketing department realized it had a problem. The agency that designed the site built dozens of website modules that required fresh editorial content on a regular basis. Short-staffed and underresourced, Marketing quickly fell into the habit of updating the home page with sales and promotions — and left the rest alone. The new Facebook page sat untouched for weeks at a time, while the Twitter feed, abuzz after the launch of the new site, began to wane in frequency and eventually grew silent.

The beautiful new site, which the retail company had been so excited about before launch, was now a thorn in the sides of the people who had to maintain it. And traffic dropped off when customers visited to find the same content week after week.

How editorial calendars can help

Experts encourage content managers and marketers to treat “post-launch” as a project phase. And that phase needs a plan.

The agency and the project managers have gone away, but that doesn’t mean you can stop thinking in about project planning. Your content strategy isn’t going to maintain itself: you need a detailed plan for executing on that strategy, every day of every week, or all the work you have put in to your new online platforms will quickly go down the tubes.

Enter the editorial calendar. A tool long used by the publishing industry, editorial calendars are useful for businesses that need to plan content across multiple sections and platforms, all while maintaining a consistent voice and strategy. Editorial calendars help you:

Think strategically

As your team scrambles to update on a regular basis, you may begin to find yourself just “filling the holes” rather than taking the time to align your content with strategic goals. Editorial calendars help you take a step back and look at the big picture, plus take the time to understand what you’re trying to communicate and plan content that supports business needs.

Plan with creativity

Give yourself the space and time to think about all the many different possibilities within strategic themes. You can be flexible with these options as things change through the year, but a calendar lets you map out lots of ideas while you’re in “planning mode,” which helps you think more creatively.

Stay on track

Without a game plan, you risk slipping off a schedule — and when you’re in the thick of the busiest times of the year, sometimes weeks can go by before anybody thinks to update the website. Stale content is almost worse than no content at all. If your content strategy involves feature content to provide context and relevancy to customers, it is important to plan for refreshing that content regularly.



What elements to include in an editorial calendar, how to start with strategy, and more. >>>

Content planning with editorial calendars

In publishing, editorial calendars are used to help publications sell ads against major themes for the upcoming year. The magazine editors may not know exactly what they're going to be writing about — they won't know the angles yet, or even what the specific topics are.

But they know generally what the issue is going to be about. For example, a magazine knows that the June issue is going to focus on personal finance, even if they don't know who's going to be on the cover, or whether the cover story will be about Suzie Orman or 10 women millionaires.



An editorial calendar for your company's online platforms can be used similarly. The tool lets you plan ahead, looking at the big picture for a given period of time and mapping out the major themes and topics you'd like to touch on to complement your company's business goals or what is going on in your industry at the time. Then, as you get closer to the date, you can use the calendar to plan more detailed and relevant content and the specifics about how to get that content sourced and written.

Strategy first: what content and where?

What are the driving principles of your online content? What are your goals, and what should your content do to support those goals? Once you've mapped that out, also determine how you plan to use each of your online platforms to support different facets of your goals. This will be important to have in place before creating a calendar that will map out content for each platform.

Example:

COZY Content Platforms

Website	Blog	Facebook	Twitter
<p><i>Lifestyle messaging; focus on driving customers to the right products</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Featured categoriesSales and promotionsSeasonal focusDesign ideasSeasonal recipes and decorating features	<p><i>Informational and inspirational content</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Seasonal content"Adventure" contentCustomer profilesInterviews with style mavensStyle trends and fashion	<p><i>Building excitement for products and getting customers involved in building the brand</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">In the news/blurbs about media appearancesFeatured customersPromotions and contests"Sneak peeks" at new products (for Facebook followers only)	<p><i>Joining ongoing conversation about style, décor and trends in home</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Reposts of news and articles about trendsObservations about where home style and appliances are goingIn the news/blurbs about the brandAnnouncements about products/brand

COZY has content on multiple online channels, which gives the company the chance to weave together its brand story across multiple touchpoints. Being strategic about what content to develop for each channel is essential for keeping up with content and getting the most out of its online presence.

Timing is everything: big-picture and timely, relevant goals

After you decide what kinds of content you'll plan to generate to support your brand and business goals, and where that content will be published, you need to begin thinking more specifically about what your business goals are and how content could support them. Start high-level.

For example, the long-term business goals for COZY's online properties might look like this:

- Use our web platforms to drive new sales.
- Engage with our existing customers, provide support and keep them loyal while upselling to them with other products.
- Build our brand with non-transactional content, and become the go-to resource for content about the home.

As the year progresses, however, goals will become more specific. They will likely be in line with your product management departments' goals, the

company's sales goals, and your marketing events and promotional calendars:

- Get people thinking about the upcoming holiday.
- Raise awareness about a new line of kitchenware.
- Promote our major annual sale.

Every company knows enough about what's coming up in the next year to be able to think ahead about goals. If you're a B2B company, you know when your big trade shows are, and often you time major product launches and campaigns around them. If you're a B2C company, you may think in terms of the Christmas holidays or some big event that drives your sales.

Whatever they are, these major goals are never a surprise for your company. So, the content themes that fill your editorial calendar should never sneak up on you either. With some digging, you should be able to map out timing of these themes well in advance, and build a bulk of your editorial content around them.

What to include in your editorial calendar

Once you have your strategy mapped out, it's time to start building your calendar. Here are some of the essential data points you'll want to include to make your tool useful.

Platforms

Build a tool that lets you map a topic across your multiple content channels (web, blog, Twitter, etc.).

Topic or Theme

Record the general content topic in this area; you can fill in content specifics later if you need to.

Dates or Date Blocks

Depending on when you update content (daily, weekly, bimonthly), show where content fits into your blocks of time. If a big trade show is in mid-July, plan related content for the previous week.

Content Elements

Here's where you can start to get more specific about planning your content.

Add fields for:

- Headline
- Subhead
- Intro copy
- Call to action
- Links
- Image source

Source Information

Plan ahead for how to produce and publish your content. Add fields for:

- Subject matter expert name
- Department/team
- Associated files or background info

Production

Use your calendar as a production calendar to get the content produced:

- Content author
- Approvers
- Due dates for drafts, reviews and publishing
- Content status

Learn about some of the best ways to build an editorial calendar that works for your team. >>>

How to build a calendar tool that works

Editorial calendars in many organizations are treated more like an ideal than a realistic tool. And that's why so many of them fail.

When companies try to put editorial calendars in place for their online platforms, they do so with the noble goal of getting more aligned with their messaging across platforms, working together across multiple departments, and better managing the resources necessary to create and manage content ongoing. Everybody agrees that the editorial calendar is a fantastic idea. But in many of the organizations we've worked with, we have seen the calendars fail within months after the launch of online sites and platforms.

Reasons why editorial calendars fail

It's not lack of enthusiasm for content strategy and editorial management that causes editorial calendars to become obsolete. Many times, calendars fail because:

- 1. The tool used to create them doesn't work for the team.** "We couldn't print it" or "nobody can access it" are common complaints depending on how the tool was created.
- 2. No one is officially minding the store.** Teams often try to fit the content management of the new website or social media platforms into the tiny fraction of time marketing staff have left in their day, rather than carving out a dedicated role with a little bit of power. A lack of managing editor or similar content management role means that there's no dedicated person who can serve as liaison across siloes and make objective decisions about content to advocate for readers and the brand. And that means the management of the editorial calendar can too easily go by the wayside.
- 3. There's no buy-in or governance.** Editorial calendars only work if everyone across the company buys in to a centralized content management model, and agree to share their marketing plans and communication needs regularly. Online content managers need the support of subject matter experts and product managers; without it, it's difficult to plan strategic content — and no calendar tool can fix that.

Creating a tool that's just for your content

The previous list brings up some all-too-common challenges that content managers face. Reasons 2 and 3 are big problems — potentially even devastating problems — and could fill volumes in a discussion of how to solve them. (They actually already do: check out the incredible thought archives of web governance experts WelchmanPierpoint at www.welchmanpierpoint.com/knowledge-base.)

But if your biggest challenge is the design of the editorial calendar tool, that's easier to solve. The most important thing to remember is: every editorial calendar tool is different. There is no "one size fits all." Here are some important questions to ask as you think about what your team needs to manage your content:

- What is your publishing process?
- How often do you publish? What are the different intervals for different areas and platforms?
- What elements do you need to plan for in your content (headlines, images, links, metadata, etc.)?
- Who needs to provide input and review for your content?
- How do you need to share your content plan?
- How frequently do you plan to update your calendar?
- What dates do you need to consider (drafts, publish dates, expire dates, etc.)?
- How do you plan to track results and do reporting using your tool?

Tools you can use

There is unfortunately no perfect tool for editorial calendars today. One commercial solution recently hit the market (DivvyHQ, currently in beta at www.divvyhq.com), and there are number of plug-ins for bloggers who want to use a calendar for Wordpress and other platforms. But as of yet there are no “go-to” solutions for creating tools for planning and managing complex content across multiple channels. Following are a few suggestions for tools that might be useful in building your team’s editorial calendar.

1. Spreadsheets

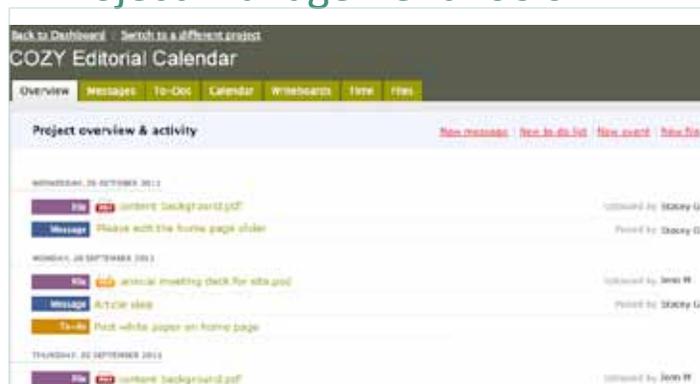


They’re not pretty, but spreadsheets can be a great tool for calendars. When we use Excel, we typically build a tab for each platform, a row for each content module or area, and a column for each time interval (weeks, months).

PROS: Familiar to everyone, cheap and easy to use, provides ability to capture large amounts of information and see your plan at a glance across time and space

CONS: Ugly, difficult to print, hard to share (unless you’re using Google Docs or Office 365), not good for storing notes and documents related to content creation

2. Project Management Tools

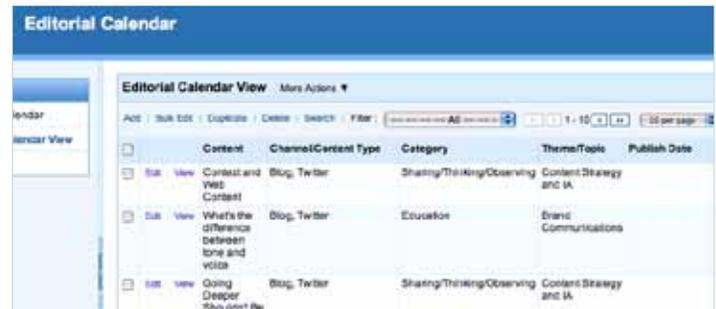


Online project management tools such as Basecamp can be a good solution for an editorial calendar tool if you have many different people collaborating on content across an organization.

PROS: Inexpensive, easy to use and access, provides a great way to upload notes, assign tasks and schedule updates on calendars

CONS: Fee-based, not a true calendar tool, little flexibility to set it up to reflect your publishing process

3. Databases



This is our favorite way to do editorial calendars, and the tool of choice here at Suite Seven for our own content marketing. With database tools, you can build custom forms that let content owners enter all the essential elements of a piece of content – headline, links, images, etc. You can provide selection lists for categories, platforms, etc. to create commonalities across records. With most tools, you can then see items in sortable lists and also in calendar views, so you can see an entire week or month of scheduled content. Our tool of choice is Zoho Creator (free); you can also use tools like Sharepoint, Filemaker, or Bento for databases.

PROS: Customizable, ability to see many different views of scheduled content, standardizes content entries to support content strategy

CONS: May be difficult to learn, some tools may be expensive or hard to access

4. Calendar Tools



Google Calendar, Outlook or iCal are also simple ways to schedule content updates. Calendar applications that can let you store details and attach files related to the updates can be especially useful.

PROS: Ability to see your week or month at a glance, ability to color-code entries to show multiple platforms

CONS: Doesn’t help with content collaboration or standardization, difficult to see content details at a glance, may not support reporting or sharing of the content plan with stakeholders very well

Some final thoughts about your editorial calendar

As you plan and design the editorial calendar for your team, there are some important rules of thumb to keep in mind:

- **Be realistic.** Don't overburden your team by planning to update content more often than you can handle or scheduling too many labor-intensive content pieces in a week. Build an editorial calendar tool and populate it with a schedule that realistically reflects your resources.
- **Think practically.** Your tool won't be able to do everything you want it to, most likely. Prioritize what you really need your editorial calendar to do, and be thoughtful about how you and your team plan to use it. Also consider your current organizational culture and how people use and adopt tools. If you're a strictly Microsoft shop and people are rabid about Sharepoint, you might have a hard time getting them to use Google Docs, for example.
- **Be simple.** There's no need to create unnecessary complexity in your tool — for instance, you don't need to create dozens of fields and options if you really only need 10 or 12. Keep your tool as simple as it needs to be, and you'll have a better chance of making it a success.

Need some support in setting up your publishing process?
Let Suite Seven help!

We specialize in creating content strategies and the editorial processes and tools to support them. If you'd like some help building, socializing, implementing and managing your company's online content processes, give us a call! We'd love to help.

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510.292.4544 p • 510.225.3922 f • hello@suiteseven.com

www.suiteseven.com