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Rebuilding CDC.gov

How the CDC.gov team used a "Clean Slate" approach to improve its content and meet the needs of the public



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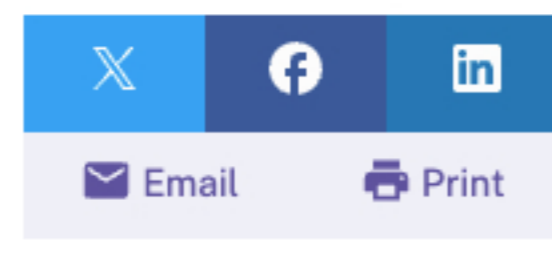
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Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) saw the need to improve CDC.gov to better serve our audiences: the general public, healthcare providers, and public health professionals.

One of the key challenges facing CDC.gov? By 2021, the site had accumulated more than 200,000 pages of content. This made it difficult for users to find the information they needed and could understand.

So, we launched an effort to modernize our digital communications. This included improving the user experience on CDC.gov by:

- Streamlining content
Enhancing navigation
Refreshing the look and feel of the website
Implementing a new content management system

In the CDC's Office of Communications, we led change across the agency and the improvement of the site itself: CDC.gov.

The approach: Project Clean Slate

Our approach to this challenge centered on an effort we named "Project Clean Slate." Clean Slate was a bold idea to take down CDC.gov and relaunch it with fresh content. This content would be intentionally written with clear communication goals and audience needs in mind.

Why this approach? We chose this path because of our commitment to bolstering public health and trust in government resources. And with the increased enthusiasm for delivering those values through digital content, we had the capacity to be thorough.

As part of the broader digital communication modernization effort within the federal government, and as part of the CDC Moving Forward initiative, we initiated Project Clean Slate to restart CDC.gov with a leaner website and consistent, well-structured content.

Key strategies from the Clean Slate approach

Our project had an aggressive timeline with high expectations — and support — from senior leadership. Our Clean Slate approach was important in helping us kickstart the project and maintain momentum. We learned other lessons throughout the project that were integral to our success. We used project management best practices to ensure our success.

No matter what approach you take to content governance, these concepts will apply and serve you well:

- Set clear goals
Collaborate with all teams
Iterate and test continuously
Continuously monitor site performance

There were a few additional approaches that we implemented during the Clean Slate process that were unique, specific, and particularly useful if your team has the support and capacity to implement this strategy.

Lesson 1. Use beta sites to test your designs.

CDC gathered feedback from more than 6,000 users over the last two years. We were committed to using human-centered design principles throughout the redesign process. We kept in touch with users early on to understand their needs and experiences. We kept this line of communication at every stage through user testing and feedback collection to ensure that user needs were met effectively.

In early 2024, we hosted a beta preview of the new CDC.gov. We received input from more than 3,000 people during testing and survey feedback before launching the new site.

Action Advice for small teams
If your team does not have the support to launch a beta site, there are other ways to conduct thorough research, user testing, and collect feedback to inform your design decisions. Use web analytics tools like the Digital Analytics Program to gain insights into user behavior, engagement metrics, popular search terms, and other relevant data points. Use this data to inform decision-making regarding navigation improvements, content optimization, or performance enhancements.

Lesson 2. Prioritize content — and the tools that support it.

Content is the reason your users are on your website — it either helps them find what they need, or it helps them get something done. We developed a comprehensive content strategy that focused on delivering valuable and relevant information to users, and that meant removing the content that could distract from that important goal. The Clean Slate approach aimed to start fresh by evaluating each piece of content based on its relevance, usefulness, and user demand. Our strategy included:

- Streamlining content by removing outdated or duplicate material
Auditing content for accuracy and readability
Developing an internal dashboard to aid our health communicators and subject matter experts in content evaluation.

Creating content that serves the public sometimes requires us to make resources available quickly. To that end, we also launched a new content management system to simplify editing and publishing content for our health communicators. It provides a built-in framework for content best practices and optimization for search engines, mobile, and accessibility.

This system is structured to help us maintain our lean footprint. It empowers our more than 1,700 health communicators to create user-centered and consistent content. It also frees up our web developers to focus on complex tasks and data visualization rather than minor content updates.

Lesson 3: Create a rubric to evaluate the most useful content.

Our goal was to retain and then optimize only the content that was highly relevant, frequently accessed, and met the needs of our intended audiences. To do this, we evaluated content based on four factors:

- User demand: The most frequently viewed content was kept. Content that was the least viewed was marked for archiving, but then also evaluated against other factors such as division priorities.
Relevance: If content was outdated or no longer applicable, it was marked for archiving.
Duplication: Duplicate information that was relevant and in demand was consolidated.
Alignment with program priorities: Content that addressed program priorities was kept, reviewed, and revised as needed.

To kick-start the decision-making process, our team built a Project Clean Slate metrics dashboard for CDC staff. The dashboard included data on page views, referrers, and search rank. This helped our health communicators and subject matter experts understand what could easily fall into the "keep" and "retire" categories. It also allowed content owners to apply qualitative criteria and make their own final decisions.

By May 2024, roughly 65 percent of existing content on CDC.gov was reduced or removed. This allowed us to direct our time and resources toward improving the quality and accessibility of the remaining content on our site.

Lesson 4. Use open communication channels to support change management.

Recognize that a website redesign can bring about significant changes for staff members involved in managing or creating content. Provide training programs, support channels, and clear guidelines to facilitate smooth transitions and ensure buy-in from internal stakeholders.

In addition to our communication and training efforts, we provided multiple avenues for feedback and questions. This included in-person presentations, a centralized email box, help ticket logs, and weekly consults for communicators across the agency on web strategy and technical issues.

We also created several options to archive and preserve content on the site that was slated for removal. Some archived content is publicly available at archive.CDC.gov, and additional content removed from public view is still accessible internally. As a fail-safe, we also provided a temporary public snapshot of the old CDC.gov at snapshot2024.CDC.gov, though this site was decommissioned at the end of 2024.

Results after the CDC.gov launch

The new CDC.gov launched in 2024 and early returns for the site are strong. Eighty-one percent of beta user participants were satisfied and liked the new site. Recent testing with members of the general public on CDC.gov show that users feel that CDC has improved their ability to find information. They also liked the look and feel, consistent page summaries, content structure, and improved navigation on desktop and mobile devices.

Ninety percent of healthcare professionals consider the new site streamlined and easy to use (compared with 75 percent the previous site design), and 93 percent of healthcare providers and 84 percent of general public users understood the main messages on the new site.

What is next for the site

We will continue to make improvements to CDC.gov throughout 2024 and beyond. By publishing content through our new content management system, we are incorporating standardized content structures based on user-tested content templates. We will continue to perform regular user testing and improve the site based on user feedback. User feedback will continue to shape our decisions on design, content organization, navigation, and overall user experience enhancements.

What can I do next?

Review featured resources on content strategy to learn how planning, creating, delivering, and governing content helps agencies achieve their goals.

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