

# How to run a conflict-free content project

A practical, step-by-step guide for managing stakeholders and agency relationships

If you've ever managed a large content project - whether that's a website refresh or the publication of a research report, or even a flagship thought leadership series - you'll appreciate how complex it can be. There are just so many moving parts.

Of all the elements involved in a creative project, the one most likely to derail things is the people. With multiple internal stakeholders to satisfy, not to mention external agencies to coordinate, the chances of running up against conflict are high.

While no one can control everything - especially other people - there are steps you can take to ensure that your content project runs as smoothly as possible, with minimal conflict. Here's everything we've learned over the course of hundreds of content projects for clients large and small.

## Planning for success

The more organised you can be in your approach to your content project, the less room you leave for things to go wrong. Here's a step-by-step guide to what to look out for before, during and after.

### Before you start

- Identify who the project lead and main stakeholders are - in particular, who will be involved in the sign off process? Have this agreed in writing and ensure that these people know what's required of them in terms of attending briefings, providing feedback etc. Also discuss who has the final say if there should be conflict of opinion later on.
- Have a kick off session with everyone - internal stakeholders, agencies etc - and agree objectives, involvement, budgets, time frames and so on. Emphasise that this is a marketing-led project, showcasing and setting expectations around your own expertise and authority within the project. Be sure to share minutes in writing afterwards and get sign off on what's been decided from everyone.

### As you're going

- Wherever possible, work iteratively. Get input from your internal stakeholders on content messaging, structure, language and so on as you go, rather than waiting until the whole first draft is done. Get sign off in writing at each stage - this can be as simple as having checkboxes at the top of each document for people to check when they're happy.

- Give internal stakeholders guidance on feedback. Make sure you discuss:
  - Practicalities e.g. using a live shared document like a Google Doc to avoid having multiple drafts all being commenting on by different people.
  - Timelines, and how feedback impacts the project's interim and final deadlines. If possible, build in buffers so your agencies get what they need and are able to stick to their agreed schedules.
  - The type of feedback you want and how to do it - do you want creative input, or simply fact checking? Guide your stakeholders through what's most helpful and what is outside their remit.

## If there are problems

- This is where you can refer back to decisions agreed and set down in writing. This doesn't mean you can't adapt plans, it's just helpful to be able to show why you might need additional time or budget to do something that wasn't part of the original plan.
- For political reasons, you might not be able to push back at your internal stakeholders, whereas an outsider may find that easier. Depending on your relationship with your agency, they could play the 'bad cop' role as a last resort, assuming they're happy to.
- Accept that there's only so much you can do - if you've hit most objectives and your boss is happy, you've done as much as you can. There are times when it's not worth your sanity to try and deliver the project the way you would ideally like to, you have to accept 'good enough'.

## Once it's done

- Take time to schedule a project debrief, talking through what went well and what didn't. This is a great chance to help educate internal stakeholders as to where their actions helped or hindered a project, and refine processes with your agency so that the next project goes more smoothly.
- Measure results against the objectives you set at the beginning and demonstrate the value of the project. This will help you get buy in - and budget - for the next one. Also use results to demonstrate the need for any changes you want to implement next time. For example, if you struggled to get press coverage for your report because journalists felt it was too salesy, you can use this to push back next time when the sales director says they want a stronger sales message or the product lead wants to include a section on your product's features and benefits.

## Internal stakeholders and how to manage them

When it comes to internal stakeholders, we're not talking about your regular marketing colleagues. We're talking about all the other non-marketing people who will need to be involved and will need careful management to ensure they don't derail the project - unintentionally or otherwise.

## Subject matter experts

Engaging with subject matter experts can be the difference between your content being average and it being genuinely impactful. But wrangling experts isn't always easy. They tend to fall into one of two categories, each of which need to be handled in a different way.

### **Expert 01: The fire cracker**

This type of expert is super engaging and fun to work with but can be chaotic if not managed properly. Which can be difficult because they're often a founder or CEO.

- Personality profile: enthusiastic, great leader, motivates people
- Communication style: fast moving / thinking, prefers to talk than write, goes off in a million directions, always has an opinion ready
- Challenge for content creators: Getting them to show up to briefings when they say they will, getting them to stick to the subject, they may change their minds between the briefing and the sign off process
- How to handle them: Keep your comms with them short and sweet, have agenda points and questions ready so you can make the most of the short bites of time they can give you, and don't be afraid to steer them back on track or push back if they're being flaky - ultimately they'll respect you for it.

### **Expert 02: The careful thinker**

CTOs and academics often fall into the careful thinker category of expert. While just as valuable for a content project, drawing the best out of them will take patience and care.

- Personality profile: detail-oriented, process driven, risk averse
- Communication style: considered, needs time to think, will want to communicate every nuance so there's no ambiguity
- Challenge for content creators: Giving them enough time to consider their answers, getting them to give just enough detail, they might struggle to sign off content that doesn't cover every angle
- How to handle them: Give them plenty of time to prepare and ideally a written brief in advance, ensure they understand the goal of the project, how they fit in and where their input finishes - they'll appreciate the boundaries being clear.

## Other challenging stakeholders

Many of the people you need to deal with for your content problem will be easy enough to work with and don't need any additional consideration beyond usual people management skills. But there are some potentially problematic individuals to identify early on.

### **The enthusiastic amateur**

This well meaning person is full of ideas - the majority of which just aren't practical. They might be a sales person, an account manager, or even a founder. Whatever the case, they're not a content marketer and they aren't strictly needed for the project but they've volunteered and now you've got to deal with them.

You can't ignore the enthusiastic amateur. You need to give them time to share their ideas and feel heard - and make sure you're really listening because you never know when they'll share a gem. Try to channel their enthusiasm by finding them a part of the project they can be responsible for that uses what skills they do have, and make sure they are recognised for their contribution.

### **The negative know all**

The gloomy equivalent of the enthusiastic amateur, this person also has no content marketing experience but still wants to be involved because they think they know better than everyone else. Chances are they've been in the company a long time or have close practical experience of the product or service.

If left to their own devices, the negative know all can derail a project fast. In group sessions they'll need careful but firm facilitation, and it can be worth trying to deal with any major challenges in a 121 setting. You might find that if you really listen to them, deal with their concerns and take their views on board, they can end up coming over to your side and being a real asset.

### **The political hot potato**

Neither inherently negative nor positive in their contribution, the political hot potato can be one to watch because they've got the ear of someone in charge and aren't used to being challenged. They could end up being an enthusiastic amateur or a negative know all - only a more powerful version.

Diplomacy is what's needed here. If you can, try to get some 121 time with a senior stakeholder early in the project so you can preemptively agree to parameters for everyone's involvement. If you run into issues, you might be able to use your agency to push back on your behalf - sometimes outsiders have more sway with this type of person and don't have the same political restrictions.

## **How to set your content agency up for success**

If you're bringing in an external agency to help with your content project, you'll want to get the most out of your relationship, and there are things you can do from your end to ensure that they are able to get on and do the job you're paying them to do.

## Decide who is doing what

Before you even commission your content agency, decide how much you want them to be involved. Do you want them to take the project off your hands entirely, run it alongside you, or simply deliver the creative? This will impact the budget, so be clear up front, or you could end up with scope creep later, which might mean going over budget. Once you've decided who's doing what, communicate this to your internal stakeholders.

## Agree ways of working and timelines

Especially when the agency will need feedback. Be honest with them about how quickly your internal stakeholders will be able to respond so that they can factor this in and not give you a false sense of how quickly the project can be completed. In our experience, in 90% of cases where a deadline is missed, it's because of slow feedback.

## Hold an inter-agency meeting

If there are multiple agencies involved in your project, an early inter-agency meeting can be incredibly useful. By collaborating on strategy, process and timelines, you'll be able to help everyone buy into a common roadmap, and iron out a lot of potential problems that might otherwise crop up later in the project.

## Share insights about stakeholders

Help your agency to understand the stakeholders that will be involved in a project, especially if they are running any workshop sessions. A heads up on personality can help them prepare. Will one person need questions in advance so they can prepare their contribution? Is there someone with a dominant personality who might take over if they're not facilitated correctly, or someone who has loads to offer but is timid and will need to be drawn out?

## Be clear in your feedback

No one likes giving feedback but it's an essential part of any content project and your agency will be grateful if you can do it well. Discuss the best ways to give feedback in advance. Do they want written comments in documents, or a meeting to discuss them? Remember that it's not personal, that being clear is better than trying to be nice, and that ultimately the goal is to meet the agreed brief rather than any one individual's tastes.

## Understanding your agency contacts

Depending on the size of the agency you're working with, you might end up dealing with a number of different people over the course of your content project. Knowing which one is responsible for which element of the project will ensure you get the right support when you need it.

## The organised one

This is your main contact for all practical considerations, from booking meetings to gaining access to documents. They might be called a project manager, a project coordinator or something else. Keep them copied in on all comms because they're the one keeping the plates spinning, and they'll be able to coordinate everyone else in their team.

## The account manager

This is the person with a winning personality who is on hand to soothe and smooth everyone and make sure the project doesn't get derailed by conflict. They're your political right-hand person, your secret weapon if internal stakeholders are being difficult, so use them.

## The strategist

This is the one who is likely to be involved in the more consultative elements of the project, such as running discovery sessions or workshops, or creating strategy documents. They'll ask the difficult questions and push back where needed - trust them, they're on your side.

## The creative(s)

These are the people doing the writing or designing. You might see them in a briefing and in some cases communicate directly with them but in general, leave them to do their thing. Leave the questions about progress and practicalities to the more organised project manager.

NB In a smaller agency, one person might fulfil more than one role. Don't be afraid to ask how responsibilities break down during the onboarding phase of the project - your agency will thank you for wanting to get it right.

## About RH&Co

Rin Hamburgh & Co is a strategic brand copywriting agency based in Bristol, UK. We specialise in working with expert-led businesses to create hard-hitting content that builds brand awareness and authority, and allows them to lead the conversation.

Our clients range from startups and scale ups to long-established, international organisations. As well as working on content projects of all sizes - from websites to white papers, article series to case study campaigns - we also offer consultancy services such as brand messaging development and content strategy.

If you'd like to discuss an upcoming project, get in touch.

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