



Top 10 Actions to Improve Website Content and Design: Questions and Answers from the “Ask Me Anything” Webinar

This document answers common state and territory questions about Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) consumer education website requirements and innovative practices for website design. A strong understanding of these requirements and practices will help you provide high-quality consumer education information to families.

This document was prepared in response to questions raised by webinar participants who attended the August 8, 2019, [“Top 10 Actions to Improve Website Content and Design”](#) webinar. Experts from ICF’s User Experience Team and the National Center for Parent, Family and Community Engagement (PFCE Center) helped the [Child Care State Capacity Building Center](#) (SCBC) prepare this document.

Web Traffic and Engagement

This question relates to “Action 1. Inventory How Your Audience Finds and Reaches Your Website.” We want to use social media for outreach to families and child care providers. Can we tell which audience is using which channel to access our site? Can we infer who is using our website based on the channels that refer web traffic to it?

- ◆ Tools like Google Analytics can tell you basic information about visitors to your website, such as the percentage of visitors who were new or returning. Unless you configure your web analytics tool, you will have difficulty attributing referral data for one channel to a specific segment of your audience.
- ◆ You can make some inferences about which channels families prefer to use based on other data sources (such as social media analytics) or what you know about how parents in your state or territory tend to access information (from user research or stakeholder focus groups). However, social media traffic doesn’t automatically mean that visitors to your website are parents. As such, it may be worth gathering data to

Additional Questions?

If you have questions about whether your planned website enhancements meet CCDF requirements, please consult with your [Office of Child Care regional office](#) for guidance.

If you would like additional technical assistance on developing and enhancing your consumer education website, contact the State Capacity Building Center (CapacityBuildingCenter@icf.com).

understand parents’ preferences for certain channels. Certain industry reports can give you insights on general trends, but to get insights on your specific audience, you need to speak with them directly or use quantitative methods like surveys.

- ◆ A word of caution: Sometimes, relying on analytics alone can leave you with blind spots and paint an inaccurate picture. For example, visitors can land on your site by clicking on a link that someone copied and pasted into a text message, a web application (like Facebook Messenger), or an email. This behavior can show up on analytics as direct referral traffic (in other words, as if someone typed the URL into a browser), when in reality, the user clicked on a link that someone shared. This [article on “invisible” shares](#) explains how this works.
- ◆ A best practice is to avoid drawing conclusions from a single data source. Instead, augment your quantitative data (for example, web traffic data) with qualitative data (for example, user feedback or user surveys) to understand why something is happening. If you understand why some families prefer to use Facebook over going directly to your site, you can think of strategies to leverage those drivers of parents’ behaviors and get them to your website.
- ◆ You won’t find answers to “why” questions using purely quantitative methods. For qualitative feedback, use consumer engagement strategies to learn about your audience members’ interests and determine how well your website or social media strategy is meeting them. Make decisions with your team and key stakeholders about enhancements to the content and how it’s presented. The PFCE Center’s [Consumer Engagement: Strategies for Engaging Families](#) (2018) resource offers ideas about gathering input, partnering with your audiences to identify potential enhancements, and evaluating the effectiveness of your changes.
- ◆ For more specific guidance on social media and how your state can leverage it to promote your consumer education website, please consider attending the upcoming [“Using Social Media to Enhance Your Web Presence”](#) webinar on November 14, 2019, from 2:00–3:00 p.m. ET. This webinar will explore how to harness the power of social media to increase traffic to your consumer education website. Participants will learn tips and resources from social media experts on how to effectively use these tools in your consumer education efforts. Additional resources will also be posted following the webinar. A recording of this webinar, as well as additional social media resources, will be posted on the [“Consumer Education Webinar Series”](#) web page.

Evaluating Website Content

What are some strategies for managing and developing website content?

- ◆ A question that comes to mind is, “How do we know that we are doing the right things and creating the right content?” For most government websites, the value of the site comes from the content it presents to the public.
- ◆ Planning, creating, publishing, reviewing, and maintaining content is a large part of maintaining a website after initial launch. How you manage this process depends on several factors, including how your team makes decisions. Having a framework or content management plan can help guide content-related decision-making to ensure it furthers your consumer education website goals.
- ◆ To guide your content management work, you may want to create a core strategy statement. This is a concise statement that ties back to your consumer education website goals and helps keep your team on course when it comes to content development. It should summarize *why* a team produces content, for *whom*, and how it meets a goal (the *what*). Your core strategy statement should be specific (so you can use it to say “yes” or “no” to tactical decisions), and easy to remember (so you can use it in everyday conversations with your team).
- ◆ You can create it collaboratively with your team, or—if you are short on time or resources—you can do it yourself. You can make one core strategy statement for your entire website or create several strategy statements that focus on specific website sections or content-based projects or themes.
- ◆ A core strategy statement has four parts:



- **Content product:** what content should we produce, procure, curate, and share?
- **Audience:** for whom is the content specifically written?
- **User needs:** why do those audiences need or expect that content from us?
- **Business goals:** what outcomes does providing this content help us achieve?
- ◆ Here is an example of a core strategy statement: “To increase the number of parents who use our child care search and make the child care search process more understandable for them, we will create online resource content for parents who are looking for child care to provide them with key information that will help them choose quality child care.”
- ◆ The process of drafting your core strategy statement can help spark conversations within your team around these 4 areas. You can refine your statement over time, as your team strengthens its content management work.
- ◆ [“Creating a Content Compass”](#) (2015) by Meghan Casey provides more information on developing a core strategy statement.
- ◆ Maintaining your content is a multifaceted task. How you maintain content that aligns with your goals depends on the members of your team, their subject matter expertise and writing skills, your publishing volume and timeline abilities, and the usability and configuration of your content management system. You should consider your resources and constraints as well when drafting your core strategy statement.
- ◆ Before you decide how to maintain your web content, consider your content management model:
 - **Centralized:** one department or team manages all content production and publishing.
 - **Decentralized:** teams throughout the organization create and publish their own content.
 - **Hybrid:** the organization combines aspects of centralized and decentralized models.
- ◆ Then, you should clearly define your team roles and responsibilities for creating, approving, and publishing content to the website. After publishing your content, consider how to maintain and conduct quality assurance on it. You should also decide who has the authority to make strategic decisions and who has the authority to make implementation decisions.
 - Someone with strategic authority (usually one person) is responsible for overall performance of the site.
 - Someone with implementation authority has day-to-day responsibilities and provides editorial oversight.
- ◆ Define an optimal process for creating and publishing on-strategy content. Identify the necessary steps for the entire publishing process; then explain each step in more detail. To refine your publishing process, answer the following questions:
 - What is each step in the process?
 - Who is responsible for completing each step?
 - Why is each step in the content management process important?
 - What is the timeline for completing each step?
 - How will each step be completed? (For example, which tools will you use? Which guidelines should you reference, and who should you consult? How will the content be copyedited and approved? Where should you source content?)

- How can we track content production to ensure that the right content is produced at the right time, at the right quality, for the right audience?
 - For a piece of content, identify the writer and—if necessary—the subject matter expert, and document its status and next steps.
 - Provide a style guide that advises your writers on things like voice and tone, web writing and plain language guidelines, and style manuals that they should use (for example, the *Associated Press Stylebook* or *Chicago Manual of Style*).
 - Create forms, checklists, and templates that writers and reviewers can use to facilitate the writing process.

My question is related to “Action 3. Evaluating My Current Website Content.” What are some helpful strategies or considerations? Are there tools I can use?

- ◆ Achieving and maintaining quality website content requires an ongoing effort. Ongoing quality improvement is all about setting goals, picking the right metrics to measure the effectiveness of your efforts, gathering data, making adjustments based on your findings, testing them, and continually repeating that process. It’s helpful to collect and review both qualitative and quantitative data throughout this process.
- ◆ Content should not just sit on your site after you’ve published it. You’ll want to periodically review your strategy and the quality of your content to make sure it is relevant, useful, and up to date.
 - Think about your content as having a lifecycle. Like a garden, it needs pruning. You might need to update or retire content that is outdated or no longer serves your audience. These resources can help you think through your content’s lifecycle:
 - Morrison, A. (2018). The 6 stages of the content lifecycle [Web page]. Retrieved from <https://blogs.gov.scot/digital/2018/08/02/the-6-stages-of-the-content-lifecycle/>
 - Digital Transformation Office, & the Australia Attorney-General’s Department. (n.d.). Manage content requests [Web page]. Retrieved from <https://guides.service.gov.au/content-strategy/manage-content-requests/>
 - Create and implement processes and steps to support regularly-scheduled and ad-hoc reviews of your website content. Define these steps and who is responsible for each step. Some review activities might include the following:
 - Scan for broken links. To do this, you typically use automated software.
 - Review content for accuracy. This might include confirming contact information and assuring policy-sensitive information is up to date.
 - Ensure content is following plain language and search engine optimization best practices. See SCBC’s [Guide for Increasing Search Engine Optimization](#) (2019) for specific guidance.
 - Review your web analytics. See the Web Engagement section of SCBC’s [“Using Data to Inform Your Website: Questions and Answers from the ‘Ask Me Anything’ Webinar”](#) (2019), which provides detailed guidance on timelines and other considerations for web analytics.
 - Review your content to make sure it still aligns with your consumer education website goals and vision. Assess whether the information you provided is meeting your audiences’ needs. Is information easy to find? Based on what you have learned, you may want to refine the location of certain content on your site to organize it more effectively and make it easier to find. If your web analytics indicate that certain pages aren’t getting a lot of traffic, or you receive repeated complaints from your audience about not being able to find information on a certain topic, it’s time to reassess.
- ◆ Consider conducting regular content-planning sessions. This is where you decide what content should be added or removed from your consumer education website, based on how they support your goals and content

strategy. Content planning should include assessing current content to validate that it is still helpful, current, and on-strategy, and identifying new content to enhance your website and further its goals and vision. Formal and regularly-scheduled content planning will inform editorial planning, such as when, where, and how you'll feature and promote your content.

- Review your content to make sure it still aligns with your consumer education website goals and vision. Assess whether the information is still meeting your audience's needs. You can use the *Content Audit template* presented in the [August 8th webinar](#) to get started. This may help you identify content gaps that can be addressed through your content planning process.
- Review where your content is located on your site. Is the current content easy to find? Based on what you have learned, you may want to refine the location of certain content on your site to organize it more effectively and make it easier to find. If your web analytics indicate that certain pages aren't getting a lot of traffic, or you receive repeated complaints from your audience about not being able to find information on a certain topic, it's time to reassess.
- If you need to learn more about your audiences' interests, the PFCE Center's [Consumer Engagement: Strategies for Engaging Families](#) (2018) resource offers ideas about different ways to gather input, partner with your audiences to identify potential enhancements, and evaluate the effectiveness of website changes.
- Consider which content performed well and which didn't. Your web analytics data can tell you that certain pieces or types of content received more traffic or downloads than others. Your team will want to adjust the current strategy based on your findings. SCBC's [Guide for Measuring Web Traffic and Engagement](#) (2019) provides tips on how to create a digital analytics process.
- Consider using frameworks to prioritize your content projects and support sustainability and effective use of staff time. Prioritization may be informed by organizational impact versus audience impact and effort versus value.
- Use an editorial calendar to guide content development and posting (where, when, and how you'll schedule your content for promotion on social media and other engagement channels). For example, you might consider promoting your website content through ads, email, online newsletter, or other opportunities to leverage stakeholder and partner cross-promotion.
- ◆ More broadly, you can also use the PFCE Center's [Consumer Education Websites: Creating a Family-Friendly Experience Assessment Tool](#) (n.d.) to help you assess how your website integrates family-friendly content elements such as use of plain language and strengths-based language.

Accessibility

This question relates to “Action 7. Ensure Your Website Is Accessible.” What are some ways I can address barriers to accessibility to help my website become accessible to all users?

The main thing to keep in mind is that accessibility is all about providing flexibility in the way a website communicates with its users. The key is to provide clear and concise content, common sense navigation, and alternative means of digesting the information provided. When trying to determine if your website is accessible, ask yourself the following questions:

- ◆ Is all content marked up so that a screen reader will announce it properly to a user who might have a visual impairment?
- ◆ Is my website fully navigable by using a keyboard? In other words, can I fully navigate the website without using a mouse?

- ◆ Did I provide text equivalents to describe all relevant images displayed on my site? For example, do charts and graphs have text equivalents that fully describe them?
- ◆ Did I offer users with visual disabilities an alternative way to read my content? For example, do informative images have text equivalents? Are form fields properly labeled?
- ◆ Did I offer users with hearing disabilities an alternative way to access my multimedia content? For example, did I provide synchronous captions for videos?
- ◆ Do I use plain language on my website to ensure that content is accessible to a wide variety of readers (for example, young, old, Basic English readers)? See [plainlanguage.gov](https://www.plainlanguage.gov) for resources on writing in plain language.

If the answer is yes to many or all of these questions, you are well on your way to providing an accessible website to a wide variety of users.

We’ve already implemented our consumer education website, so what is the best way for us to integrate some of these best practices with accessibility?

- ◆ Conduct an accessibility audit for your site. Work with developers to fix any issues found in the audit. If an audit was not completed, ask members of your information technology (IT) team to install a web accessibility plug-in for their browsers to help them locate accessibility violations, and have them follow the directions it provides to fix them.
- ◆ Make sure the website can be navigated without a mouse and ensure that anything that can be triggered with a mouse can also be triggered with the keyboard.

Resources for Enhancing Consumer Education Websites

This question relates to “Action 5. Follow Plain Language Guidelines.” How can we ensure that the consumer education information, such as the website, social media, and other written material, is written in plain language? Is there a certain readability level that states and territories should use in their consumer education materials?

- ◆ One resource that states and territories can use for plain language guidance is [plainlanguage.gov](https://www.plainlanguage.gov). This website provides guidelines, examples, and free online training to help states and territories write clearly. In short, plain language is about being concise and clear—and writing as you would speak. Using plain language on your consumer education website will allow stakeholders to find the information they’re looking for and use what they find.
- ◆ You can also find plain language tips throughout the PFCE Center’s 2018 *Foundations for Quality: A Consumer Education and Engagement Series*, specifically the *Consumer Education Websites: A Guide to Creating a Family-Friendly Experience* and *Consumer Engagement: Using Social Media to Engage Families* resources. These tips are based on federal plain language guidelines and are tailored to include specific early childhood and school-age child care examples. In these guides, you can also find tips to enhance readability and learn about how writing content at certain reading levels can increase your audiences’ understanding.
- ◆ An eighth-grade reading level is widely accepted as an appropriate target for information meant for the general public. For easier reading, aim for a sixth-grade level when developing content for parents.
- ◆ The Flesch-Kincaid readability test can be useful to measure the grade-level of your content. You may find this readability test in your word processing software. You can also use plain language strategies to help lower your content’s reading level. For example, try using shorter sentences and words with fewer syllables.

- ◆ Some states and territories may have guidance or regulations on which reading level you should use in material that you present to the public. Check your state or territory agency guidelines before you create consumer education materials to make sure you are following the appropriate guidelines.

How do we know if families are able to find and use the information on our consumer education website? How could we improve or enhance this?

- ◆ One way to understand how families use your consumer education website is to conduct user research and testing of content on the website.
 - User research seeks to understand users’ expectations, behaviors, needs, and motivations when they engage with products like consumer education websites. User-centered approaches also help increase satisfaction with the website.
 - User testing evaluates how stakeholder groups interact with a website and helps you identify and verify gaps in how a design meets their needs. User testing is key to successful product development and can help a state or territory determine if its consumer education website is helping stakeholders accomplish tasks, answer questions, and find the information they are looking for. It can also help states and territories figure out if their websites are helping them meet their defined consumer education goals.
- ◆ See SCBC’s [“Using Data to Inform Your Website”](#) (2019) webinar and materials, which highlight how states and territories can use web engagement tools and data to understand how consumers use their websites.
- ◆ Inviting families’ input early in the development process and creating opportunities for ongoing engagement will help ensure that you include information that families value on your consumer education website. It’s also helpful to get input from stakeholders who represent all of the families you are trying to reach. The PFCE Center’s [Consumer Engagement: Strategies for Engaging Families](#) (2018) resource offers tips, strategies, and examples that you can use to get feedback from families and other stakeholders—including everything from surveys, focus groups, data walks, and “parent cafés.”

Search Engine Optimization

Help me understand search engine optimization (SEO). What kinds of questions should I ask my IT department or website manager about SEO?

- ◆ Many states and territories want to ensure that stakeholders can find their consumer education websites. SEO increases the likelihood that target users will find web content through search engines. SEO works by affecting where content ranks in search engine results pages (SERPs). Most users click on content that is linked in the top few results on the first SERP. For most websites, the majority of visits come from organic search referrals (in other words, the user runs a search and follows the link directly to the site), most of which come from Google’s search engine.
- ◆ SEO is almost always the most effective way to increase web traffic. Beyond ranking higher in SERPs, many SEO improvements ultimately result in a better website experience for users.
- ◆ Ask your IT department or website managers about the tactics that they use to increase the likelihood that families and child care providers can find the consumer education website. Ask if they’ve conducted an SEO audit; ask about mobile optimization and load time, and ask whether the URL structure is “clean.” Below are examples of “bad” and “good” URL structures:
 - Old link: <http://example.com/products%20%26%services/index.jsp?category=Inl&id=0315>
 - New link: <https://www.example.com/products/lawn-mowers>
- ◆ SCBC’s [Guide for Increasing Search Engine Optimization](#) can help you think about the types of questions to ask. Since SEO is a technical aspect of the consumer education website, you will want to work closely with

your IT department or website managers on this task. This guide may also be helpful to your technical support team as they work to increase SEO on your consumer education website.

How can SEO help families find the consumer education website?

- ◆ SEO is the process of making it easier for search engines like Google and Bing to find your website. By taking measures to optimize content for the way these online platforms index it, you make it more likely for your content to appear in your target users' online search results.

What is the most important element of SEO and why?

- ◆ *Content SEO*, or having useful, usable, and relevant content that engages your target users, is the most important aspect of SEO. However, good *technical SEO* is also important to ensure that you aren't doing harm to your search ranking and user experience or losing users to other websites. Please see SCBC's [Guide for Increasing Search Engine Optimization](#) (2019) for more detailed guidance on content and technical SEO.

SCBC Resources

- ◆ [Designing Websites That Are Accessible for All Families](#) (2019): This guide offers best practices, strategies, and examples for state and territory staff to consider as they work to ensure that their consumer education websites are accessible to people with disabilities.
- ◆ [Guide for Increasing Search Engine Optimization](#) (2019): This guide presents tools and resources you can use to make sure search engines can easily locate content that is relevant to users' needs.
- ◆ [Guide for Measuring Web Traffic and Engagement](#) (2019): This guide offers best practices, strategies, and guidance for states and territories on the importance of digital analytics to IT teams and web or digital marketing vendors, and it includes approaches that experts from those types of teams can use.
- ◆ [Improving Consumer Education Websites with User Research](#) (2019): This guide summarizes key methods that are widely applied in user-experience research and design. It also highlights best practices and key considerations in conducting user research to help states and territories enhance their consumer education websites.

PFCE Center Resources

- ◆ National Center on Parent, Family and Community Engagement. (2018). *Consumer engagement: Strategies for engaging families* [Guide]. Retrieved from <https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/public/strategies-for-consumer-engagement-508-final.pdf>
- ◆ National Center on Parent, Family and Community Engagement. (2019). Foundations for quality: A consumer education and engagement series [Web page]. Retrieved from <https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/resource/foundations-quality-consumer-education-and-engagement-series>



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**State Capacity Building Center,
A Service of the Office of Child Care**

9300 Lee Highway
Fairfax, VA 22031

Phone: 877-296-2401
Email: CapacityBuildingCenter@ecetta.info

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