Zen and the Art of Content Strategy: My Approach to Redesigning Moz's Learn Center

Isla from Moz shares her secret for tackling those overwhelming, intimidating content projects.

By Isla McKetta August 17, 2016

If you've seen me at my desk lately, you might think I've been employed to examine my split ends, explore the far reaches of the interwebs, listen to that one Moby song over and over for hours, or cut paper into tiny shreds.

But this is my process.

You see, I'm working on a really big project and content strategy is hard (in a good way). But the project is so massive to my brain that those seemingly mindless activities are really my brain's way of looking for patterns while my brain looks for a way into this project.

The project I'm tackling is to completely rethink the way Moz presents our learning resources.

Does that intimidate you? Because I'm stumped. Excited, invigorated, thrilled, piqued, and enthused. Did I mention stumped?

But I've been here before (both with prior content strategy projects and with the two books I've written), and **I want to share with you my secret for attacking the biggest projects**. I'll offer some sneak peeks into the thinking behind our forthcoming Learn Center in the process.

The Zen Garden of Content Strategy

Non sequitur much? Bear with me. My grad school advisor, Micheline Aharonian Marcom, compared editing a book to raking a Zen garden. First you arrange the boulders, then you clear the rocks, and only after that can you rake the sand. Because if you're going to worry about typos in a 300-page novel when you still haven't decided if your hero is a man or a woman, you're making a lot of extra work for yourself.

The trouble is, sometimes the typos are the easiest things to see; just like it's easier to write one more blog post than it is to rethink your taxonomy. Enter those tiny trivial tasks I mentioned earlier. They keep the front of my brain busy while I use the rest of it to wrestle those content strategy boulders in place.

This post is intended as a framework to get you started, not a mandate on how to work. Your definitions of boulders, rocks, and sand might be a little different. You might choose different patterns as you rake that sand. You're a content strategist. You already know a lot about what strategies work for you.

Click to jump:

1. **The Big Picture**: Placing The Boulders

2. **Establishing Priorities**: Sorting the Rocks

3. **Fine-Tuning the Details**: Raking the Sand

1. The Big Picture: Placing The Boulders

The boulders phase of any project is one of the most intimidating. This is where you set the pillars that the rest of the project grows around, so not only is their placement crucial, but they're kind of big. That means it's essential to get them in the right place at the beginning so you don't have to move them around a lot.
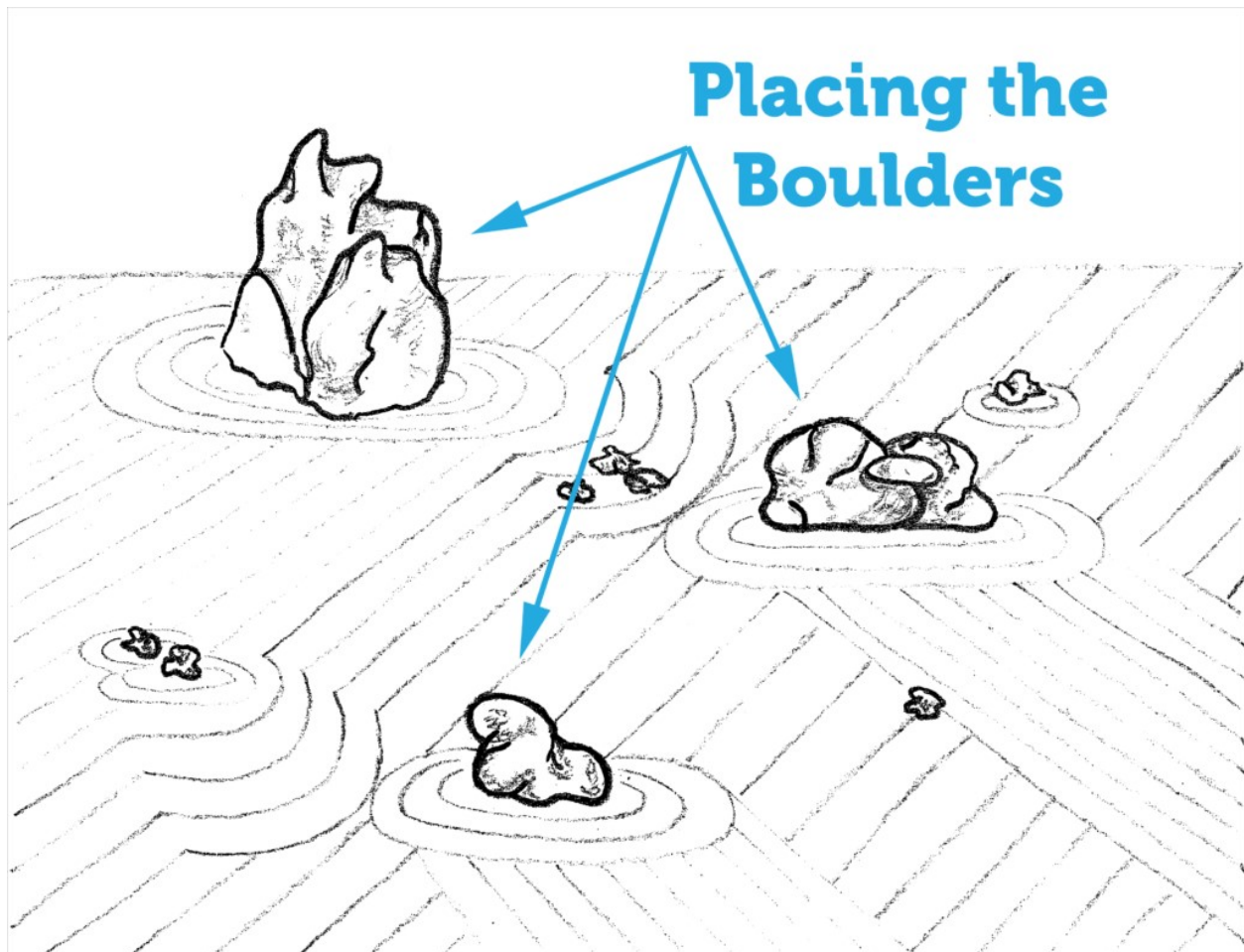
To set the right foundations for my Learn Center project, I need to describe and place the following boulders:

- **What is the project?**

- **What's the scope?**

- **What are the goals it should accomplish?**

- **Who is the audience?**

What is the project?

At Moz, we pride ourselves on our learning resources. Providing that kind of open, free information is where we started as a company. Unfortunately, none of that pride is evident in our outdated, jerry-rigged Learn/SEO page:

Yes, you can find things. But if you scroll further down the page, you'll see it's just a list of resources with very little actual guidance. We could plug literally anything into this page (as long as it had a thumbnail) and it would get happily lost amongst the clutter along with everything else.

What's the scope?

I could have chosen to redesign this page. But as we add new products to help digital marketers of all types, our educational resources should really be expanding too. I got the go-ahead to make this project as big as I want it to be. And I want one learn center that covers SEO, local SEO, content marketing, and social media. I also want to create a framework that can be expanded on later if we decide to cover other topics.

What are the goals?

a. Attract potential customers to our funnel by creating one centralized, kick-ass resource for all of our educational content.

b. Educate the next generation of digital marketers and give current digital marketers the information they need to understand the importance and how-tos of online marketing.

c. Provide one home for our educational content so we can focus on creating and maintaining best-in-class content.

Who is the audience?

At first I thought I wanted to reach *all the marketers*. Then I realized that audience is too broad. While I'm sure expert digital marketers also want to know the latest and greatest changes in the field, they're much less likely to be attracted to a learning center and more likely to be served by our blog. Whew! One fewer type of audience to solve for.

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But "Beginner" and "Intermediate" are too broad to provide much valuable information. Especially since we are starting to offer marketing workshops in addition to our traditional self-directed learning resources.

So I broke down our audience like this:

|	**Active Learner**	**Passive Learner**
Beginner	Seeker	Freshman
Intermediate	Quester	Upper Classman

We're building a centralized resource for beginner and intermediate digital marketers that will provide self-directed learning and workshops on the topics of SEO, content marketing, and social media.

For now.

Once I got those boulders placed, I felt a lot better about this project. Note that once your boulders are in place, it's a great time to double-check their placement with the powers that be before you start the next step.

2. Establishing Priorities: Sorting the Rocks

Now that the boulders are arranged, I can start thinking a little about the smaller rocks. Some will be part of the arrangement and some need to be raked out of the sand.
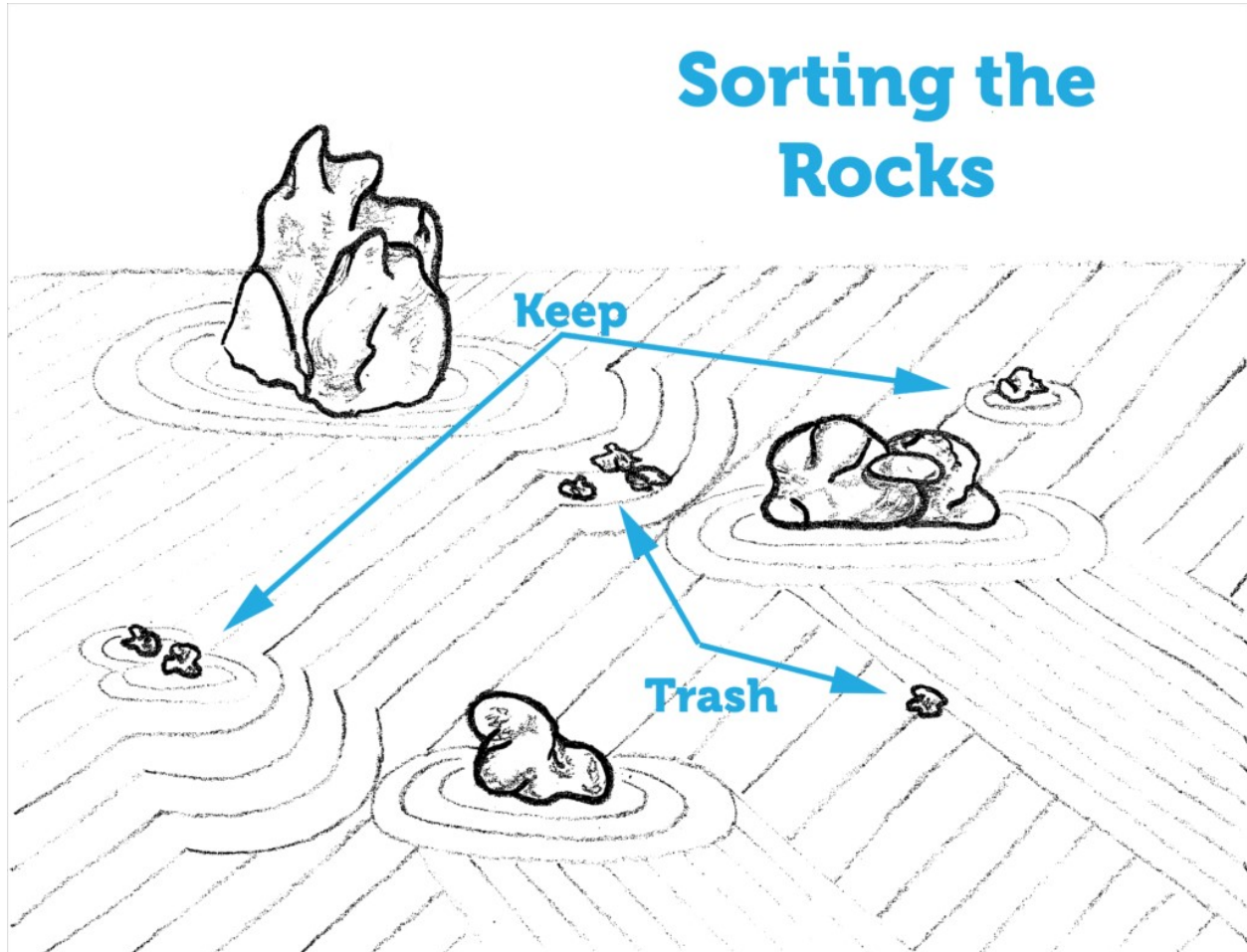
Here's what I needed to sort through for this project:

- **How much information should we surface?**

- **What's the underlying taxonomy?**

- **What questions are we answering?**

- **What form does the information take?**

How much information should we surface?

The challenge is to get the researcher the amount of information they want while not overwhelming the student. I could have chosen to do this hierarchically on one page or separate out different pages. This

speaks to the conventional wisdom that "less is more." That applies to buttons, words, links, and everything else that might "clutter" the user's decision-making process.

The students will want the best top resource and then to be pointed to classes. The researchers will want access to the best resources with an opportunity to dig deeper and likely a path on where to investigate next. There's a real opportunity here to curate a learning journey.

There are different levels of information:

- Need to know

- Want to know

- Nice to know

It's my job to determine what is essential and to help the audience parse that information and the hierarchy. I may not include all the "nice to know" information, but if I'm sculpting a journey, I have to think about breadcrumbs (literal and metaphorical) they can use if they choose to venture down those digressive paths.

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When considering what to include, the order of priority should always be:

1. The audience wants to learn this, and then

2. We have something that speaks well to it. If we don't have something that speaks well to it, then we need to come up with a new resource that does (subject to prioritization of course).

What's the underlying taxonomy?

This is a great time to start thinking more deeply about how to categorize information.

The temptation is to slap our usual categories (blog post, Mozinar, Q&A, etc.) on the content and serve it up in little boxes that speak to internal stakeholders. But internal stakeholders aren't our audience.

My favorite forest economist (okay, he's my dad) told me a story about the taxonomy of cedars in Latin America. Turns out that when the Spanish came over in the 1500s, they saw trees that looked like cedars to them, so they called them cedars. Scientifically they belonged to a different genus or species or something, but the name stuck.

So does it matter to our audience that the Mozinar is a Mozinar or do they want to know that it answers question X that they have? Although I need to know that Erica manages Mozinars so we can coordinate on content, it's safe to say that our audience would rather we act as content concierge and categorize our information on the question it answers for them.

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What questions are we answering?

At first I came up with a list of twelve or so questions I thought our audience might have. The list contained everything from "What is SEO?" to "How do I measure the ROI of content marketing?" Which was great. But the list was too granular, and unless I wanted the first page of our interface to be a super-lengthy list of questions, it was too much info.

By looking at use case and surfacing the top-level questions first, users who are the most engaged and want the most information are the ones who dig the deepest into the Learn Center. Using a dendritic structure, I can provide the right content (and the right amount of content) to create a sane and wonderful learning environment.

The top-level questions are:

- How do I improve my search ranking?

- How do I increase my traffic?

- How do I increase engagement?

Which cover the higher-level needs of both beginning and intermediate digital marketers. It might seem like an odd choice because many of the tactics we do as digital marketers actually overlap those questions, but I actually like the way that forced me to look beyond the silos of our respective industries. Instead I could focus on the results people want to achieve and provide them with a richer experience and a wider array of skills than simply setting them on an SEO or content marketing track.

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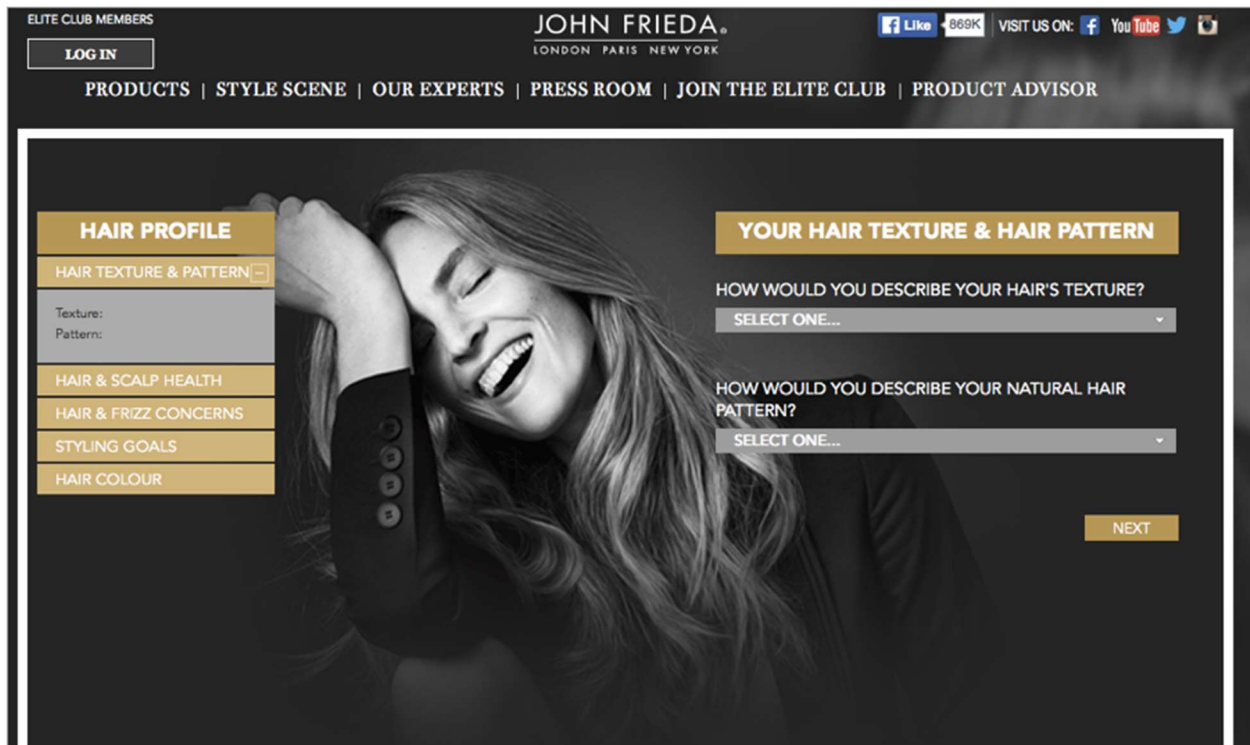
Which led me to this conceptual model:
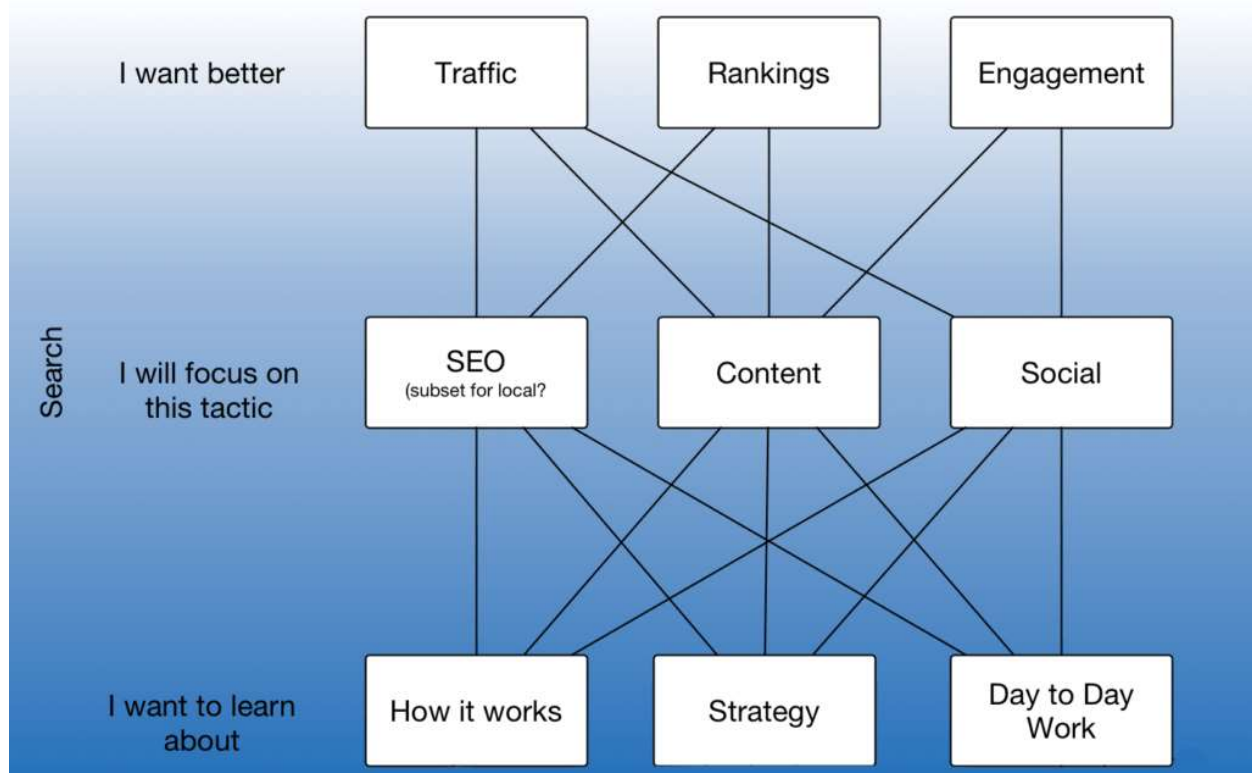
This model also helped me understand how to address the divide between beginners and intermediate users. The initial questions are open enough to capture near beginners and as long as they don't get hung up on which tactic to explore first, they can get very quickly to the "How it works" pages. Then I don't have to clog up the rest of the pages with basic information.

What form does the information take?

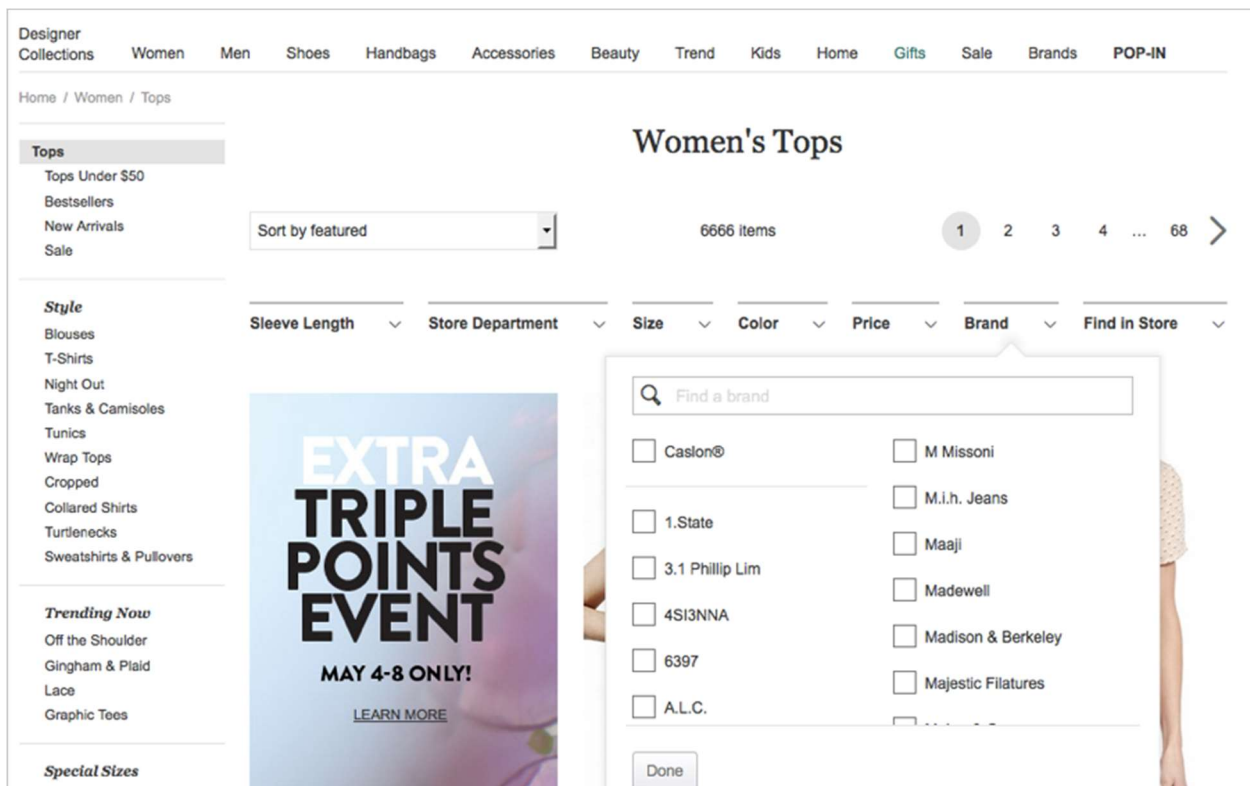Obviously we're not going to just dump info, even on those researcher-types.
There are two interfaces I've come across recently for selecting information that I really like.

One's from John Frieda and asks some key questions and then delivers the visitor to the right product.

I also like this interface from Nordstrom which allows you to filter thousands of search results based on a lot of different categories. This could be helpful for the student group who gets more resources delivered to them. They could slice and dice based on marketing channel, type of content, etc.

Sidebar:

I also want to give them the chance to get more content, so opportunities to sign up for Top 10/ Local Top 7, ask questions on Q&A/Moz Local Forum, Mozinars, Events. Idea for this is a sidebar. "Want to learn more? Explore our Newsletters, Blogs, Forums, Videos, Events, Classes (each with a dropdown). This satisfies the learning styles piece I've been worried about. It's also replicable on all learn pages whether we do by category or not.

3. Fine-tuning the Details: Raking the Sand

Which brings us to the sand part of our Zen garden.
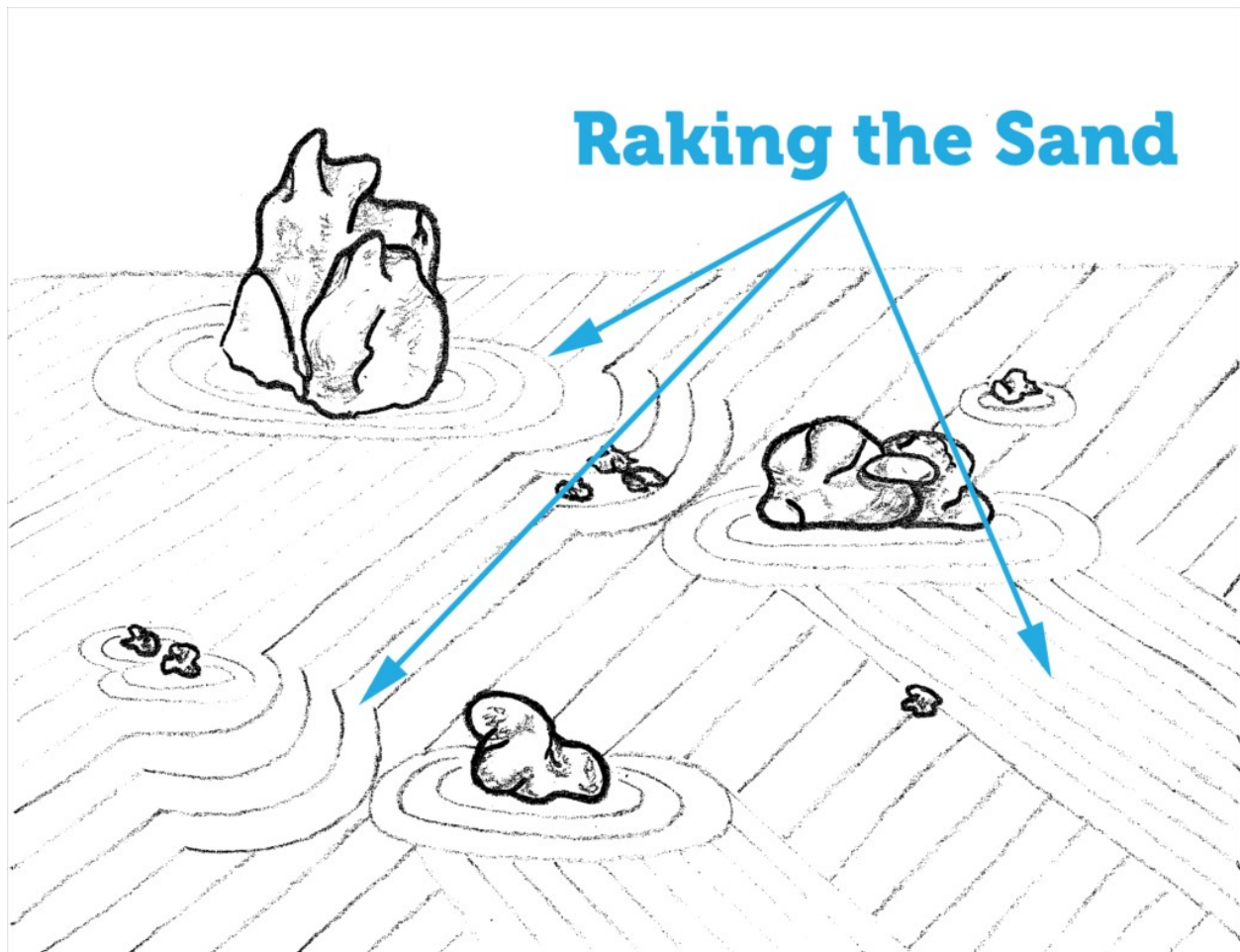
That sounds relaxing and I'm almost done with this project. Wouldn't that be nice? What it does mean, though, is that because I've gotten the boulders in place and pulled the unnecessary rocks out of the way; now I have a clear field to focus on these billions of grains of content.

Enough with the metaphors.

At the sand stage of this Learn Center, I'm working on the following:

- **Fleshing out the conceptual map**

- **Tying content to pages**

- **Auditing content**

- **Working on a design**

Did you catch the gerund there? I'm work*ing* on the project still. That means I don't have a big reveal at the end of this post. It wouldn't be fair to Conductor to co-opt their space for that anyway. The fact that this is a work in progress also means that you have the chance to pick this baby apart and give me your best advice. We'll get to that at the very end.

Fleshing out the conceptual map

The conceptual map above is a pretty good start, but it doesn't show the full depth of pages users should be able to drill through, nor does it show the overlaps in user journeys. This does:
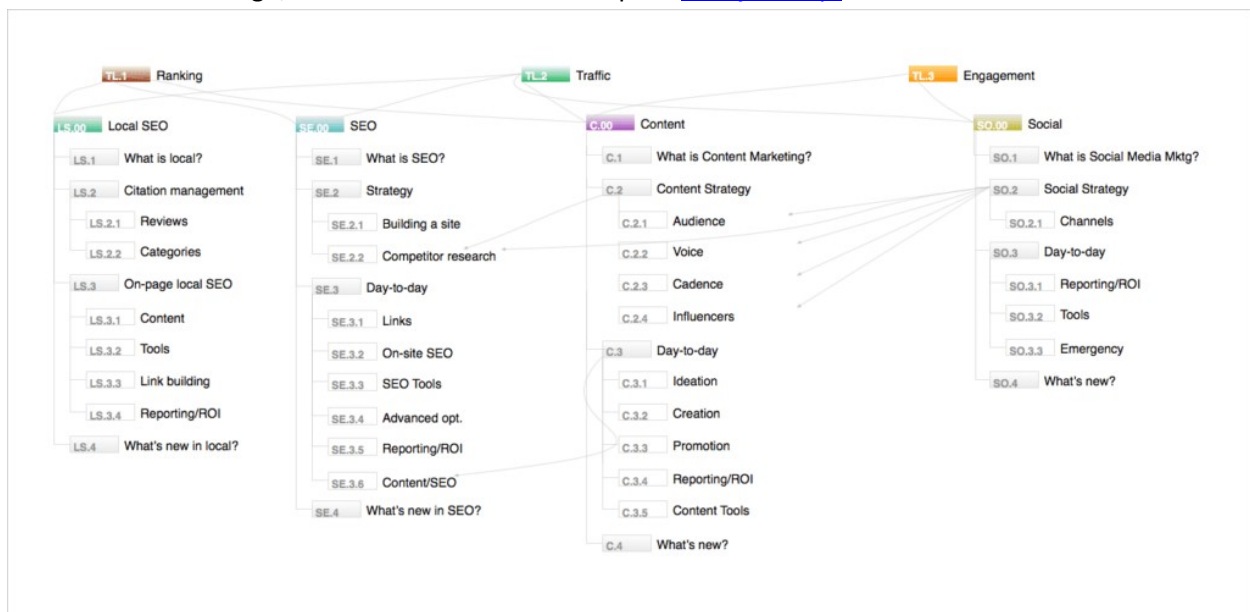
This is one place where my inexperience might be showing. Because while I understand that site maps are meant to be linear, I cannot imagine an approach to learning digital marketing that is linear. That and it will be pretty hard to convince me that a content marketer and a social media marketer aren't better off from learning how each other approaches audience research.

Tying content to pages

The illustration above maps out 50+ separate pages that need content. Some of these pages, like SEO as a means to rank and SEO as a means to get more traffic can have very similar content because they are really interstitials that acknowledge the user's approach and help direct them to the wider look at the

goals they're achieving with good work. But I still need to figure out what content is needed where.

Auditing content

The hard part is those sub, sub pages. Because this is where that content audit I've been avoiding comes in. Technically I haven't been avoiding it. I actually started this whole project by starting a content audit.

But it didn't take too many minutes of looking at ten years' worth of daily blog posts (that's 5,000+ blog posts, if you're counting) to realize I needed a framework to understand what content was necessary before deciding which 3-5 blog posts, webinars, Q&A answers, etc. were the very best pieces of content to surface on each topic.

So, yes, my candle is burning a bit from both ends. And I might have latched onto this Zen garden analogy to help me as much as it can also help you.

But now I really do have to audit that content. To do that, I'm going to take each of the 50+ pages we're filling and determine:

- **What would live there in an ideal world**

- **What content we have that's perfect**

- **What content we have that needs reworking**

- **What content we need to create**

- **What content it would be nice to add in the future**

That last one might wait for version two of this project.

Working on a design

This is where I'm going to leave you wanting more. Partly because I want the final design to surprise and delight you and partly because I haven't gotten the go-ahead from our designers yet.

What I can tell you is that an essential part of Moz's core TAGFEE values is "Fun" and I'm most excited to make this learning resource as fun as possible.

Shower Me with Advice

I hope you've found this Zen garden analogy useful. Now get ready for a confession…

I'm surprisingly new to this whole content strategy game. And this is a really big project for me, plus I'm completely self-taught. What that means is that I know there are holes in my process *but I can't see*

where the holes are. As a writer, I do know enough about big projects to know that there comes a time when everyone needs feedback.

So please help me. Put your stamp on this project. We'll be doing user testing at several points as this project develops, but more than anything I want your expert opinion on this project. Tell me what I've missed or where I've gone astray. Share your favorite learning resources with me.

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Because although my boulders are relatively set, I'm totally willing to rearrange some rocks. And don't even get me started on the sand. That stuff needs to be raked and re-raked every single day. But, with any luck, the answers get finer and finer with every pass of the rake.

Until then, I'll be right here at my desk, picking at the ends of my hair, liking more baby pictures on Facebook, and rocking out to Moby. I mean, organizing the Zen garden of my content strategy.

Help a sister out, and comment below. Then, sign up for our blog newsletter (it's only once a month!):

About the Author: Isla McKetta

Isla was previously a Content Crafter with the content team at Moz where she used her interests in information hierarchy and user experience to research and write about the latest developments in inbound marketing. Having lived on three continents, she's a sucker for big ideas about how linguistics and culture shape online experiences.