

The background is a solid yellow color. It is covered with a repeating pattern of small, white, stylized icons. These icons include various digital devices and communication symbols, such as smartphones, laptops, tablets, smartwatches, speech bubbles, magnifying glasses, and eyes. The icons are scattered across the entire surface, creating a dense, textured effect.

# DESIGNING CONNECTED CONTENT

**PLAN AND MODEL DIGITAL PRODUCTS  
FOR TODAY AND TOMORROW**

**MIKE ATHERTON  
CARRIE HANE**

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- **The Columbo moment (5 minutes).** Try to “end” the interview at least five minutes early. This gives time for something that will be familiar to fans of TV detective Columbo. The crumpled police lieutenant would interview a suspect. He’d then make as if to leave, before turning back with an innocent-but-crucial “oh, just one more thing....” With your interview subject, it’ll be the other way around. As you pack up and head for the door, your interviewee will get a flash of inspiration. They’ll explain some crucial detail that would otherwise get missed. This doesn’t always happen, but expect the unexpected.

This should go without saying, but be on time and be courteous. These folks aren’t part of your project team. They don’t have to help you out, so be nice. Tell them you heard that they’re the expert in this subject (it always pays to butter them up). Tell them that you need their help in explaining things step by step:

FADE IN:

INT: Event planning office. Day.

Coffee-ringed papers litter every desk. A busy whiteboard looms large, plastered with sticky notes and graffitied with gridlines. Poster mock-ups peel from the walls. Phones ring in the background, the soundtrack to perpetual urgency.

YOU

Thanks so much for your time! My name is Carrie, and I’m working on content for the new IA Summit website. You’re chairing the event. I heard you know everything there is to know, so I was hoping to spend the next hour picking your brain. This isn’t the conversation where we talk about what should go on the website. This is just to help me understand how this event works so that I can plan the content. If it’s okay, I’d like to record the conversation so I don’t have to take quite so many notes.

So please, tell me about the IA Summit.

EXPERT

Sure. Gosh. Where to begin. Well, we’re currently planning next year’s event, which will be at the Hilton in Chicago. Right now, I’ve just signed one of our keynote speakers, which I’m pumped about.

They've never spoken at the event before. Over there you'll see Dalia, my co-chair. She's chasing up some of our volunteers to help with promotion. It's a busy time for us, as our call for papers has closed now. We need our reviewers to help select which talks and workshops and stuff go into each program track.

*Whoa, let's back up a second. Your expert has just thrown a bunch of useful information at you. But understandably, it's weighted toward the things they're thinking about right now, so it comes out a little jumbled. Still, it's more than enough to start asking questions:*

YOU

You said next year's event is in Chicago. Is there an IA Summit every year? Is it always in Chicago?

EXPERT

Yes, there's an event once every year. It's always in a different city somewhere in North America. Last year we were at the Hyatt in Vancouver.

YOU

So it's always in a hotel? Does that make it easier to keep everyone together?

EXPERT

Most always in a hotel, yes. It means they have conference facilities already set up. And rooms, of course. Wherever we hold the event, we always manage to get a discounted rate at a downtown hotel.

YOU

I didn't realize there was more than one co-chair! Are you all volunteers?

EXPERT

Oh, no one gets paid—I wish we did! So we need a bunch of people helping out. There are three co-chairs—we are replaced every year. There're also people like the curation manager and the experience director. And the people who review submissions. Last year I managed the review process, so I know how tricky that is.

YOU

Okay, so there are some different roles filled each year. And sometimes the same person might have one role one year and a different role the following year?

EXPERT

Yeah, they might even wear a few different hats for the same event—just depends on how many volunteers we get. Some previous attendees or speakers are now getting more involved in organizing.

*Interesting. So now you know it's an annual event, with a different location each year—usually in a hotel, because they need conference facilities and attendee accommodation. There are several roles associated with each event, and the same person might have one or more roles for a given event. Let's keep going:*

YOU

You mentioned the reviewers were planning the program tracks. How does that work?

EXPERT

Every conference has some sessions—talks, shorter talks, and hands-on stuff. Reviewers decide which session submissions make the cut. They plan out the main three days. Each day starts with a keynote, then splits into three tracks. Attendees choose whether they want to see more academic or practical talks. We all come together again at the end of the day for our happy hour. On Saturday night, we'll have karaoke too, assuming we can get a sponsor. Oh, I forgot! Before the main conference, we have a couple of days of pre-conference workshops.

YOU

Tell me more about the tracks. Can any kind of session go in any of the tracks? What about the keynote and the social events?

EXPERT

Yes. We try to mix up different session formats in each track. The 5-minute lightning talks were popular last year, so we're doing those again.

For the keynotes and socials, everyone's invited. It's not just keynotes either. We've started doing things like morning yoga. But doing that extra stuff depends on sponsorship.

YOU

Can a sponsor only sponsor a social session?

EXPERT

We'll gladly take their money for any kind of session! Often they sponsor specific social sessions, like the happy hour. But sometimes they just give money to the event generally...

As you chat, tease out information to give structure to your understanding of the domain. By asking clarifying questions, you expose the inherent logic and business rules. You'll later express these through content and interface design. Keep digging into areas of complexity:

- Are speaker and keynote speaker two different roles?
- Can organizers also be speakers at the same event?
- If each conference is an “event,” what do you call the IA Summit as a whole?
- How are pre-conference workshops different from main conference sessions?

Your goal is to come out of the interview with a list of terms. You should understand what each of those terms means (**TABLE 4.1**) and how they fit together.

**TABLE 4.1 TERMS AND DEFINITIONS**

| TERM     | DEFINITION                                                                                                            |
|----------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Brand    | The overall IA Summit brand, distinct from specific conference events.                                                |
| Event    | The 2016 IA Summit is an event.                                                                                       |
| Location | Place the event is held. Different city each year.                                                                    |
| Venue    | Within the location, a specific venue (usually a hotel) houses the event.                                             |
| Hotel    | The “official” hotel for attendee accommodation. Usually this is the same as the event venue, though not necessarily. |
| Person   | An individual associated with one or more events.                                                                     |

*(continues)*

TABLE 4.1 **TERMS AND DEFINITIONS** *(continued)*

| TERM           | DEFINITION                                                                                                                                        |
|----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Role           | The specific role (such as speaker, co-chair, or volunteer) a person has within an event. A person may hold one or more roles for the same event. |
| Topic          | May refer to the subject theme of a specific session or of an overall event.                                                                      |
| Session        | A specific occurrence within an event, such as a workshop or social.                                                                              |
| Session format | The type of session, such as 45-minute talk, social, or workshop.                                                                                 |
| Track          | A thematic grouping of sessions.                                                                                                                  |
| Sponsor        | Company that sponsors (contributes financially to) an event or session.                                                                           |

Soon you'll use these concepts to construct an abstract model of the subject domain. We've found, though, that it's often difficult to get people to think at this level. If interviewing alone isn't getting you the answers you need, try using an exercise.

### CONDUCTING A CASUAL CARD SORT

A card sort is a popular exercise for helping people categorize information. Take a set of index cards with you to the interview. On each, write down one concept from the subject domain (you may have gleaned these from previous interviews). Ask your interviewee to arrange the cards in a way that makes sense to them. This may be in piles of related things or by just placing related things close to each other. If they want to, let them create new cards, remove cards, or rename existing ones. As they go along, ask them to "think aloud" and explain their decision process. In truth, the cards themselves aren't important. They're just physical stimuli to help your participant think and talk aloud about the subject's structure.

### SKETCHING A MENTAL MODEL

Some people express themselves better visually rather than verbally. Take a drawing pad and some sticky notes to the interview. As you chat, start to jot down the concepts you hear, drawing lines to connect related concepts. You're making a "mind map." Show your interviewee what you're doing. Have them

help you sketch (**FIGURE 4.2**). Work together to draw a visual representation of the domain. In Chapter 5, we'll develop this idea as you build a detailed domain model.



**FIGURE 4.2**  
Collaborative  
sketching of a  
mental model.

## TALKING TO THE USERS

Those domain experts know their stuff, don't they? It's so useful to draw on their experience and soak up their knowledge. But it's not the whole story. Unless you're making a product for those experts, you have a whole other group to consider: your audience.

Who are the target users of your product? Who's the audience for your content? These are the folks your work serves. Not the client. Not the boardroom. Content is for use. Anyone engaging with your product does so because they have underlying needs and questions. Maybe they need to understand mortgages. Perhaps they're looking to restore a vintage sports car. Could be they're just dying to know what cool and funny baby-panda-on-a-slide videos are out there.

Go talk with them. Your experts have armed you with enough context to understand the subject. When you listen to users enthuse, you'll have at least some idea of what they're talking about. You'll find their take on the subject a little different from the SMEs'.