



# THE USER NEEDS MODEL

Driving Relevance, Resonance, and Revenue in Modern Newsrooms

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# INTRODUCTION

**The User Needs Model:** Driving relevance, resonance, and revenue in modern newsrooms.

## WHY USER NEEDS MATTERS IN NEWS PUBLISHING

In the fast-evolving world of digital journalism, the relationship between news organisations and their audiences has shifted dramatically. With the sheer volume of information now available, readers no longer wait passively for news; instead, they seek out stories that speak directly to their concerns, interests, and daily lives. Audiences are demanding, selective, and overwhelmed by choices. In this context, meeting their needs is no longer a luxury—it's a necessity for survival in the industry.

The User Needs Model is a framework that was developed to guide newsrooms in crafting content to navigate this. In its second iteration (User Needs Model 2.0), created by smartocto and Dmitry Shishkin, it further identifies the key 'user needs' that are most relevant to news audiences. At its core, the User Needs Model challenges traditional approaches to journalism by turning the spotlight on the audience.

It recognises that news consumption today is driven not just by a desire to stay informed, but by a range of emotional, practical, and intellectual needs. People don't just want to know **what's happening**; they want to understand **why it matters, how it affects them, and what they can do about it**. They seek stories that inspire them, help them solve problems, or simply offer a moment of amusement on a busy day.

For newsrooms, embracing this approach means identifying their strengths and weaknesses across the different user needs, selecting those user needs relevant to their audience, and continuously and actively reevaluating the content balance, enabled by collecting and analysing the right data. Successfully applying the User Needs Model has real-world

implications for how newsrooms function, from the stories they choose to tell, to the way they present those stories, to how they measure their success. In a crowded media landscape, where attention is fragmented and trust in institutions is often fragile, the ability to meet user needs is key to fostering loyalty and engagement.



# THE USER NEEDS LAB PROGRAM

By adopting the User Needs Model, news organisations can not only improve the relevance and resonance of their content but also build stronger, longer-lasting relationships with their readers. As a data-driven editorial tool, **the smartocto platform** empowers newsrooms by providing real-time data and analytics that help categorise and track content performance based on these eight user needs.

The tool's smart notifications guide editorial teams by flagging content that resonates with readers or identifying gaps where user needs are not being met, ensuring that the newsroom's output remains aligned with audience expectations. The result is content that is not only more aligned with what

readers want but also more likely to drive engagement, loyalty, and revenue growth.

**In User Needs Labs, FT Strategies partnered with Smartocto** to work with nine publishers to support their adoption and effective implementation of the User Needs Model. Each publisher was given access to smartocto's user needs analytics platform, and strategic support from FT Strategies to enable them to gather real-time insights into their audience needs. The program led publishers from articulating their "North Star" goals, conducting baseline article performance analyses, before identifying 'growth hacks' to improve audience engagement based on user

needs insights. Publishers also attended regular cohort sessions and individual consultations, to explore further frameworks and techniques such as the quadrant model, Content Performance Indicator metric, notifications and analytics, and newsroom integration.

They also heard from industry experts from major news organisations that had successfully implemented the User Needs Model into their newsrooms. The program equipped publishers with both the strategic frameworks to enhance their content strategy and practical tools needed to integrate the User Needs Model effectively into their workflows to realise tangible results.

The banner features the Smartocto logo in the top left, navigation links for 'features', 'content', 'support', 'company', and a search bar with a 'get a demo' button in the top right. The main headline reads 'actionable insights on your stories', with 'insights' highlighted in a pink rounded rectangle. Below the headline, the text 'Analytics made easy' is followed by a paragraph explaining the value of smart analytics and custom notifications. A smartphone graphic displays a notification, with an arrow pointing to a text box that says 'Our smart alerts help your newsroom spring into action on every relevant story'. At the bottom right, icons for Slack, WhatsApp, and Mail are shown, with the text 'Smartocto notifies on every story in Slack, WhatsApp, Mail or any other inbox of your choice'.



# HOW THE USER NEEDS MODEL WORKS

The User Needs Model categorises the drivers of audience’s news consumption into eight distinct needs across four angles: to know (fact-driven), to understand (context-driven), to do (action-driven) or to feel (emotion-driven). Newsrooms can use this framework to try and better meet those needs that bring audiences to their publication.

Below, we have described each of the eight user needs with an example of a headline aligned to this need. The example article here is one describing a volcanic eruption in Iceland:

<b>Fact-driven</b> I want <i>to know</i> something	<b>Context-driven</b> I want <i>to understand</i> something	<b>Emotion-driven</b> I want <i>to feel</i> something	<b>Action-driven</b> I want <i>to do</i> something
<p><b>Update me</b></p> <p>Provides breaking news and timely updates to keep readers informed about current events.</p> <p><b>EXAMPLE:</b> “Iceland volcano erupts.”</p>	<p><b>Educate me</b></p> <p>Often journalists underestimate how little their audience knows about (complex) topics. Explaining the essentials can be a powerful way to engage with your audience, and when done right, these types of articles could easily turn into evergreen content.</p> <p><b>EXAMPLE:</b> “Why so many people still live around volcanos.”</p>	<p><b>Inspire me</b></p> <p>Provides motivational, uplifting stories that inspire action or reflection.</p> <p><b>EXAMPLE:</b> “Hero saves entire family after volcano erupts.”</p>	<p><b>Help me</b></p> <p>Delivers practical solutions and advice to help readers solve specific problems.</p> <p><b>EXAMPLE:</b> “These volcanos are dangerous to climb.”</p>
<p><b>Keep me engaged</b></p> <p>Helps the audience to participate in a public debate on the topic by broadening their view on the issue and the surrounding discussions.</p> <p><b>EXAMPLE:</b> “Politicians react to volcano eruption.”</p>	<p><b>Give me perspective</b></p> <p>Contextualises stories, often through the use of experts and analysts, helping readers to better understand the alternative perspectives, the pros and the cons, within a complex issue and supporting them to form their own opinion.</p> <p><b>EXAMPLE:</b> “Volcanos are getting more dangerous due to climate change.”</p>	<p><b>Amuse me</b></p> <p>Offers light-hearted or entertaining content for enjoyment and relaxation.</p> <p><b>EXAMPLE:</b> “Incredible footage of an erupting volcano.”</p>	<p><b>Connect me</b></p> <p>Helps readers connect with communities, ideas, or people with shared interests or experiences.</p> <p><b>EXAMPLE:</b> “Volunteers needed after volcano erupts.”</p>

**The User Needs Model** comes into full effect when used in conjunction with well thought through topics and formats. The primary user need guides the purpose of each piece, ensuring that content meets specific audience motivations, such as staying informed, seeking inspiration, or finding practical advice.

Topics define the subject matter—whether it’s politics, lifestyle, or technology—and determine the relevance of the story to different reader segments. Finally, formats—such as long-form articles, videos or infographics—determine how the content is presented, aligning with audience preferences for consumption. To expand further on formats and audience preferences for consumption - it is important to consider the ‘moment’ of the day when the audience is consuming the content. The ‘moment’ can indicate the audience’s mindset and user need, and may point to a particular format that will engage them more effectively.

For example, a long-form video may not be the ideal format for a commute to work ‘moment’ experienced on a mobile phone. An explainer video or layered infographic can work very well in an early evening ‘moment’ when there is more time available to deep dive into specific topics.

The synergy between these elements is crucial because it allows news organisations to tailor content that not only resonates with audiences but also maximises engagement. For instance, a “Give me perspective” need can be addressed with an in-depth analysis of a trending political topic, delivered in an engaging format like an explainer video.

By balancing user needs with the right topics and formats, publications can create more impactful content that is relevant, accessible, and enjoyable for their audience, ultimately fostering loyalty and deeper engagement.

This strategic alignment, facilitated by tools like smartocto, enables newsrooms to deliver high-quality, audience-centred journalism that aligns content production with what audience’s value, and in turn, increases commercial value.





Part 1

# THE IMPACT OF USER NEEDS ADOPTION / CASE STUDIES

A key phase of the User Needs Lab program was for publisher participants to experiment with 'growth hacks'. These were recommendations that came out of the Smartocto tool's User Needs analysis of each publisher's content, including adapting or rebalancing content in line with user needs. Publishers saw a range of improvements in key engagement metrics, and we have included examples of these case studies below.



## SOLUTION

The editorial team decided to reduce the production of “Give Me Context” stories with negative emotional framing and to increase the production of “Inspire Me” stories with more positive emotional tones. By adjusting the emotional framing of headlines, the team sought to better align their content with audience preferences and optimise engagement.

## RESULTS

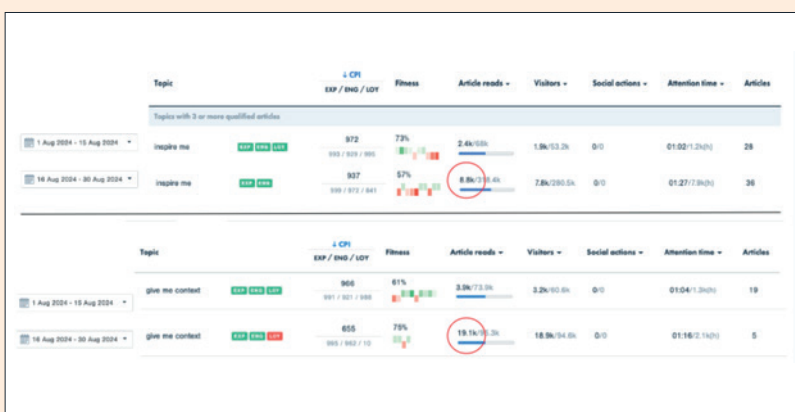
The changes resulted in significant improvements:

# 3.7x

The average number of article reads for “Inspire Me” stories increased by 3.7x.

# 4.9x

The “Give me perspective” stories were refined to focus on positive framing, and they saw a dramatic increase, with average reads improving by 4.9x.



Overall, there was no significant change in the performance of “Update me” stories. However, despite an increase in output, the “divert me” stories saw a slight dip in performance.

Upon closer inspection, it suggests that quality may have been compromised by an overemphasis on quality.

## INSIGHTS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Several potential improvements were noted during the experiment. The testing period was focused and concise, but expanding the sample size could provide more robust and conclusive insights.

The team recognised the need to constantly re-evaluate data to avoid distorted results due to fluctuations in traffic acquisition channels.

The results also highlighted the importance of focusing on meaningful metrics such as average article reads or potentially using the median as the sample size grows.

## CONCLUSION

Blic’s experiment demonstrates the effectiveness of the User Needs Model in refining content strategies to better address audience expectations. By tweaking headline strategies and focusing on the emotional resonance of content, Blic was able to substantially boost engagement, providing a clear case of how data-driven editorial decisions based on user needs can yield dramatically improved results.



## CASE STUDY: BAUERNZEITUNG

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### OVERVIEW

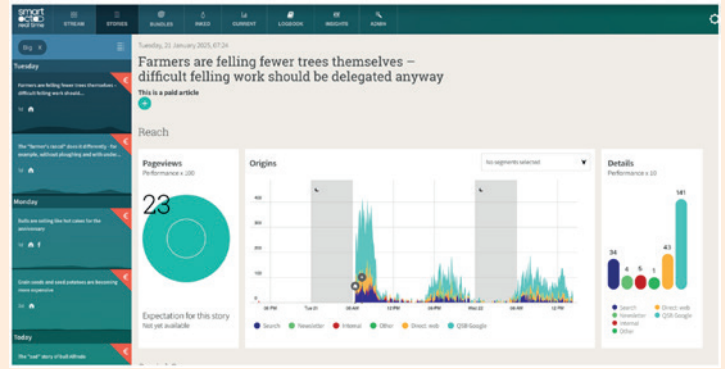
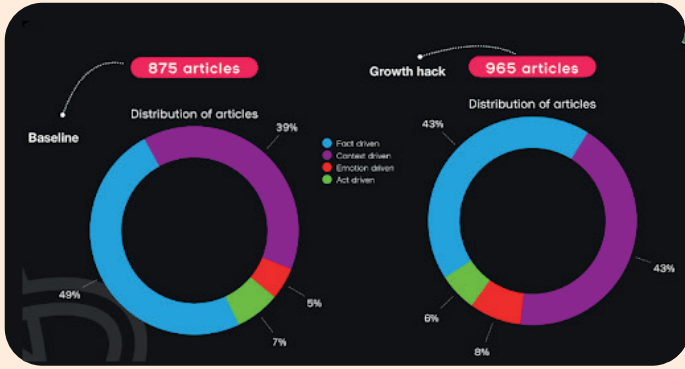
BauernZeitung is Switzerland's leading agricultural publication. It offers comprehensive coverage of national and international agricultural topics, including production, farm management, agricultural policy, market trends, and rural life. The publication reaches over 200,000 readers across its Swiss readership. Beyond its print editions, BauernZeitung maintains a robust online presence, providing daily updates, multimedia content, and an e-paper archive.

BauernZeitung adopted a growth hack to refine its content strategy. The primary objective was to enhance reader engagement by shifting from its concentration of specific user needs being currently met to more diversified content across multiple user needs, with a particular focus on increasing emotionally engaging stories.

### CHALLENGE

Initially, BauernZeitung's content was heavily concentrated in the fact-driven and context-driven categories, representing nearly 90% of the total content output. Emotion-driven stories, which were identified as high-potential content for engaging with readers, were notably underrepresented.

This lack of balance in representation of user needs across articles, limited BauernZeitung's ability to capture and sustain reader attention in key sections like "Agrarpolitik" (agriculture policy), "Landleben" (rural life), "Landtechnik" (agricultural technology), "Markt & Preise" (markets & prices), and "Tiere" (animals).



## SOLUTION

Through the adoption of the User Needs Model supported by the Smartocto platform, BauernZeitung implemented several growth hacks:

### 1 Increase Emotion-Driven Content:

Recognising that emotion-driven stories had a consistently high engagement, the team significantly boosted production in this category. Emotion-driven articles were also expanded into previously underrepresented sections.

### 2 Multi-User Needs Coverage:

To create a well-rounded content offering, BauernZeitung ensured that popular topics were addressed from multiple user need perspectives. This approach allowed articles to appeal to different audience preferences and increased overall relevance across sections.

### 3 Consistent Tracking and Adjustment:

The team closely monitored Smartocto's dashboards and notifications, using data insights to make real-time adjustments to the content strategy.

## RESULTS

The experiment yielded positive results:

### 1 Emotion-Driven Content Performance:

Emotion-driven articles became the standout category, achieving high pageviews, attention time, and increasing new visitors to the website. For example, the top performing emotion-driven article had 15% higher page views than the previous top performing article within the “inspire me” user need category.

### 2 Validation of what Users found Engaging:

Emotion-driven content also showed the longest attention time compared to other user needs, indicating that readers were more engaged with these stories. Additionally, the increase in emotion-driven content had a positive impact in drawing in new visitors (45% of the audience consuming emotional content were new visitors), underscoring its value in attracting a wider audience.

### 3 Balanced Content Production:

By diversifying content across multiple user needs, BauernZeitung saw improved engagement in sections where emotion-driven stories were introduced, such as ‘agrarpolitik’ (56% increase in average page views) and ‘andleben’ (33% increase in average page views). Having a more balanced spread of articles across user needs resulted in improved article performance across the board.

## INSIGHTS AND CONSIDERATIONS

The experiment revealed the importance of continuous data evaluation and strategic alignment. Smartocto's analytics provided valuable insights, and the BauernZeitung team recognised the need for consistent data collection and KPI tracking to maintain clarity and comparability. Emotion-driven content emerged as an opportunity area, affirming that pulling levers that elicit an emotional response could drive engagement and attract new readers.

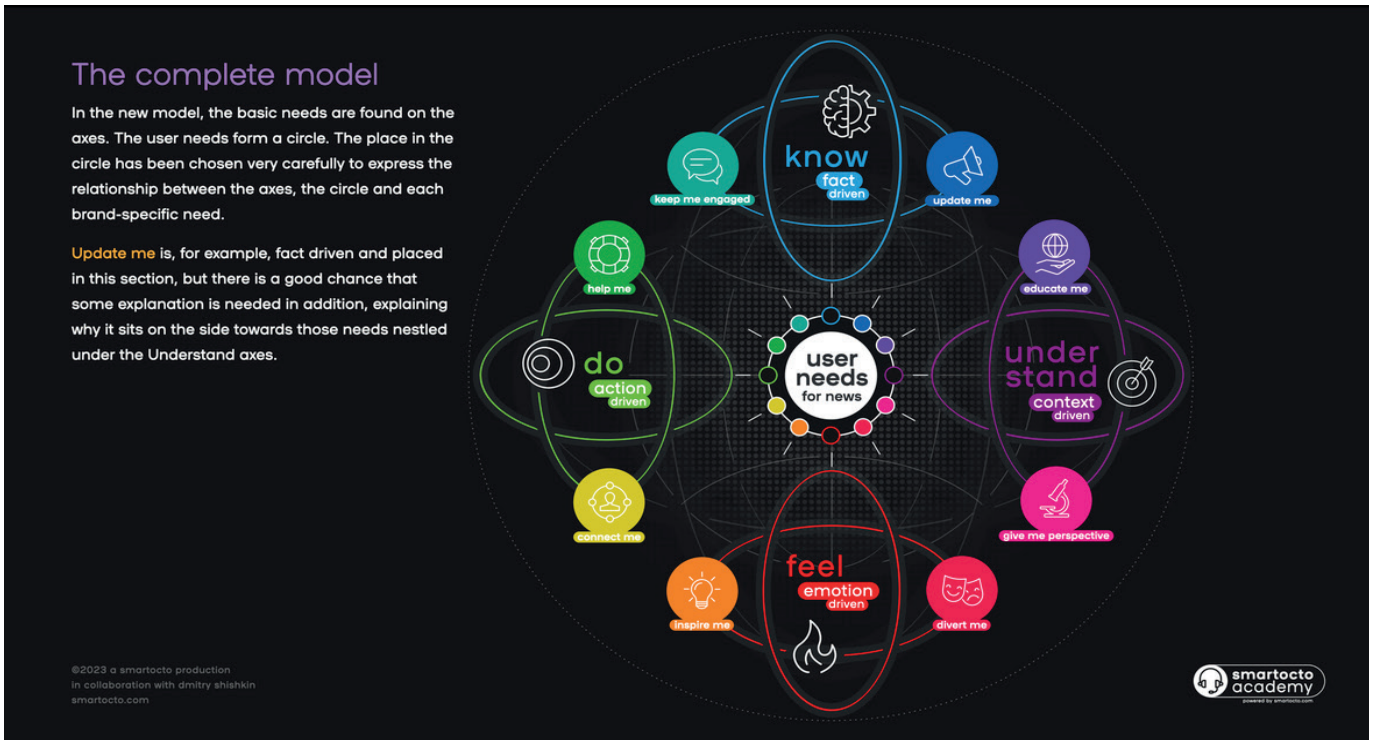
## CONCLUSION

BauernZeitung's growth hack experiment highlights the effectiveness of a data-driven approach to the User Needs Model. By expanding into emotion-driven stories and diversifying content perspectives, the publication boosted its audience engagement and broadened its readership. With the support of an analytics tool like Smartocto, BauernZeitung was able to fine-tune its content strategy and rebalance its mix of articles to increase its resonance with audience needs.

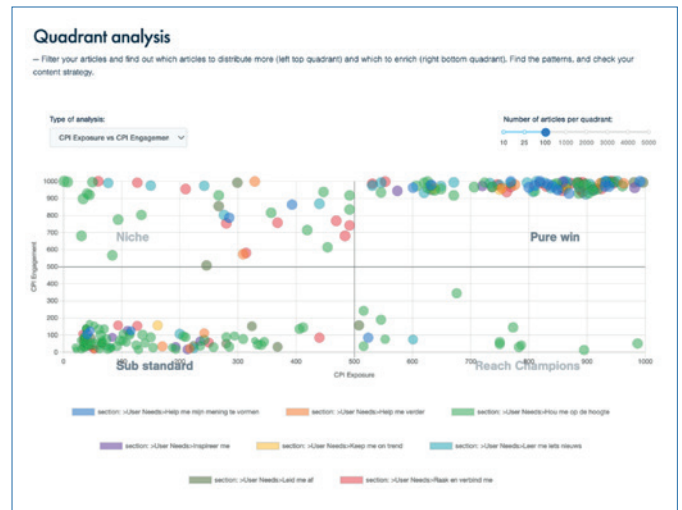


PART 2

# STEPS TO SUCCESSFULLY INTEGRATE THE USER NEEDS MODEL INTO YOUR NEWS ORGANISATION



Implementing the User Needs Model can significantly refine your content strategy by aligning it closely with audience motivations and engagement patterns. There are some key steps to implement the model effectively, from setting up the fundamentals through to experimenting with data-driven growth hacks.



## 1 Set the Foundations by embedding User Needs within your organisation and having the right tools in place

Laying a solid foundation by upskilling your people and implementing the right tools helps ensure the User Needs Model is effectively integrated into your newsroom’s processes, making it easier to produce audience-focused content.

A shared understanding of user needs within your organisation including your Editorial team is critical to seeing success with the model.

Audience engagement today is driven by a mix of motivations: readers want to be informed, inspired, and often guided on how to respond to what’s happening around them. Staff training on the benefits of user needs enables editorial teams to see content creation from the audience’s perspective, and regular refreshers or workshops keep these principles in focus.

Having an analytics platform like smartocto enables you to track, analyse and visualise content performance. This allows for data-driven insights into how each piece of content meets

specific user needs. Real-time tracking, tagging, and data visualisation— alongside key metrics like pageviews, Content Performance Indicator (CPI), Quality Reads, and attention time— give editorial teams a nuanced view of content impact.

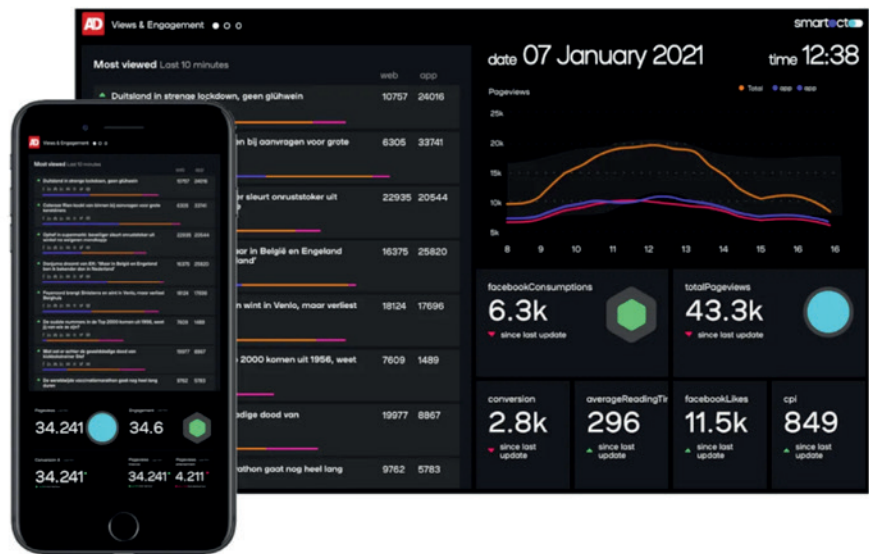
This setup allows editors to track engagement across different needs and adjust content based on real-time insights, ensuring the audience’s motivations are always front and centre.

## 2 Define your user needs and decide how to apply them

Select the most relevant user needs for your organisation and audience and align them with the right KPIs. This will help refine your newsroom’s focus and track success more effectively. The User Needs Model encompasses a variety of motivations, but which needs you prioritise should reflect your brand and audience profile. For example, a lifestyle publication may place more emphasis on “Inspire me” and “Keep me engaged,” while a business publication might focus on “Give me perspective” and “Educate me.” Defining the needs that best align with your audience helps ensure that your content strategy resonates with them.

Recognising when your audience is most interested in different user needs will help you to better tailor your coverage. There’s a strong relationship between user needs, topics and formats, and understanding this at a content section level is your first priority in optimising your content strategy. Additionally, publishing a short and sharp ‘Update me’ article for a given topic can be powerful. It gives your audience the facts and ability to engage with a news event.

Clear KPIs allow you to measure the impact of the model in a way that is meaningful to your content performance targets. Metrics like engagement rates, Quality Reads, or time spent on a page for specific needs categories can provide insights that guide editorial choices. Setting targets for each KPI, whether focused on retention, subscriptions, or engagement, ensures the User Needs Model supports measurable outcomes.



## 3 Track and monitor your article performance

Ongoing monitoring and analysis provide valuable feedback for optimising content strategies as you go. A structured tagging system aligned with user needs is essential for assessing which types of content resonate most with your audience. By categorising each story according to user needs, editorial teams gain clarity on the effectiveness of their content mix and can make data-driven decisions to address gaps or re-balance as needed.

Use dashboards and notifications to maintain a broad view of content performance across user needs, supplemented by real-time insights that provide a current view of performance. Reports tracking improvements over time provide a clearer picture of overall strategy success than standalone metrics. This setup supports both short-term responsiveness and long-term alignment with audience expectations.

## 4 Develop data-driven growth hacks for tangible impact

With insights in hand, experimenting and iterating with “growth hacks” can drive engagement and amplify the value of user needs insights. Use accumulated data to form hypotheses about which combinations of user needs, topics, and formats are most effective. Experiment by adjusting the content mix—for example, increasing “Inspire me” articles if data shows high engagement—ensuring that editorial strategies evolve with audience preferences.

Incorporate growth hacks into your editorial workflow, setting monthly goals for content output aligned with KPIs. Consistent integration of these practices enables iterative refinement, helping your team stay agile and responsive to evolving audience needs. By following these steps, your newsroom can embed the User Needs Model into daily practices, creating content that meets readers’ needs while fostering engagement and loyalty. A structured, audience-focused approach like this enables impactful journalism that resonates with your audience’s expectations and motivations.



# ABOUT FT STRATEGIES AND SMARTOCTO

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## FT STRATEGIES

### About FT Strategies:

FT Strategies is the specialist media consultancy owned by the Financial Times. Staffed by the experts who successfully transformed the FT's business model in the face of disruption, FT Strategies provides the expert insight and consulting excellence required to transform the future of business based on real-world, first-hand experience. FT Strategies has worked with over 800 organisations globally helping them to address strategic challenges, drive sustainable growth and innovate using AI, technology and data.

[ftstrategies.com](https://ftstrategies.com)



### About Smartocto:

Smartocto is the most advanced editorial analytics system in the world, making data actionable for newsrooms and marketing teams all around the world. Known for its AI, smart notifications and connection with content strategy, smartocto builds story impact and ensures actionability in small teams as well as big organisations.

[smartocto.com](https://smartocto.com)

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