



Why You Need a Content Management System

By David Beveridge



Without one, you may face major legal and communication problems.

Each year, nonprofits invest untold resources in their Web sites. Yet updating and maintaining these sites can be a big, costly headache.

That's where content management systems come in. A content management system (CMS) can make your Web operation more efficient while addressing some fundamental issues that plague many Web sites. Here's how a CMS can help you bring quality content to your site.

What Is Quality Content?

The goal of every organizational Web site is to marry an efficient publishing operation with compelling and reliable presentation. On the back end, the content needs to be authored by the right people, approved by the appropriate entities, and fully auditable. On the front end, content must be consistently presented in accord with organizational brand standards and delivered on time. Let's look at these five traits of quality content and see how a content management system can help achieve them:

1. Authored by the Right People

In a traditional Web shop, there are the content creators and the Web team. Content is generated throughout the organization. Ironically, the one entity responsible for formatting and placing that content online – the Web team – is frequently not a content creator. This separation of content creation – and content *ownership* – from the people responsible for publishing the content often results in tension between the Web team and content creators. Members of the Web team feel they're juggling a large amount of conflicting priorities, while content owners feel they lose control of their work product, handing it off to techies who don't really understand it.

This is the Webmaster bottleneck.

A key benefit of content management systems is that they restore balance to the publishing

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equation. They break the bottleneck by separating technology from content.

Content authors can use the CMS toolset to focus on the content itself, letting the system take care of the technical aspects of formatting and posting. They don't need to send their content off to be managed by someone else. They open a CMS program on their desktop, change the content, and send it to the system for publishing. Anyone in the organization can author site content, while Web staffers use their training to support the system.

2. Approved by the Right People

In many organizations, items are posted on the site without review by the staff responsible for that content. This doesn't happen because organizations are rife with rogue employees. It happens because Web publication uses HTML, a mysterious and incomprehensible technology to most people. So in Web shops, the review and approval process becomes cumbersome and haphazard. The non-techies don't know — and don't want to know — HTML, so expedience rules.

The words and images on your site are an essential part of the public record.

Content management systems provide the Web equivalent to familiar processes used in print. An item is authored using well-known tools and automatically sent into the publishing workflow, where it moves from review to review, using e-mail to notify the players at each step in the flow, until it reaches the final approval stage. Mistakes are reduced, potential liability is minimized, and time is saved.

3. Auditable Content

Because a few keystrokes can change or delete the content in a publicly-available document, orga-

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nizational Web sites constitute a dangerous liability problem, not to mention a source of miscommunication. The ephemeral nature of HTML-based content aggravates this situation. Not only is this content sometimes unrecoverable, it's also not subject to audit. It can be difficult to determine when changes occurred and who was involved.

Everyone who runs a Web site knows that content comes and goes and changes on a daily basis. Without a way to capture every version of every item published, there's no true audit ability for published Web content.

Content management systems can provide such an audit trail. In some systems, every iteration of every item is saved, as is a record of when and by whom an item was created, posted, edited, or deleted.

Web sites have become the public face for organizations. The words and images on your site are an essential part of the public record. From the standpoint of liability, record-keeping, and internal knowledge management, an audit capability is an essential asset delivered by content management systems.

4. Consistent Presentation

Consistency is key to Web sites. The way a person navigates through the site, the hyperlinks and icons used, and the "voice" people encounter on each page can make the Web experience as pleasurable—or as painful—as the designers provide.

Authors shouldn't be worrying about these issues. Do you think Tom Clancy and Danielle Steele are responsible for how the printed page works in terms of fonts, page numbering, and other presentation details? Yet many Web authors agonize for hours over presentation issues, because HTML requires layout information to be encoded

onto each page.

Content management systems separate content from site design and navigation. Through the use of page templates, sites maintain a consistent look and feel. This frees authors from the onus of worrying about presentation and ensures that your site's presentation, navigation, and design approach will be maintained no matter how often content is changed. The time-consuming process of presentation occurs when the templates are built and never needs to be addressed again.

5. Up-to-Date, Not Out-of-Date

Timely content is not just nice to have. Efficient content publishing means that your audiences have the information they need when they need it. It also means that out-of-date information doesn't cause legal problems for your organization.

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Content management systems offer two great advantages in terms of timely content delivery. First, they allow anyone with the proper permissions to post content. They eliminate the Webmaster bottleneck — that place where conflicting requests land, all of them due at the same time, creating a chokepoint and a potential failure of timely publishing. The CMS can handle as many simultaneous transactions as necessary. By pressing a "Submit" key on a Web form, any staffer can ensure that content is updated when it needs to be, rather than relying on a single Web team member with many tasks in the queue.

Second, most content management systems provide for content *scheduling*, letting staffers specify when a piece of content goes live on the site. Thus, publication timing is removed not only from direct human input but from any other environmental constraints. Neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night, nor interna-

tional time zone differences matter to a CMS. Content can be created and approved hours, days, or months ahead of time. When the appointed moment arrives, the content goes live.

Content scheduling modules can also provide for content expiration. Let's say you want a promotional area to go live on the site at a given time, stay live for a specific period, then disappear from the site. Content scheduling can automate that process.

Easing the Major Pain

We've now looked at the five key traits of quality Web content and seen how content management systems support them. But what about the biggest complaint of all? It's a lament heard in every Web organization: "All I want is to update a sentence on this page. Why is it such a big deal?" If you

can open your word processor and change a memo, why can't you open up a Web page and do the same?

You can. With a CMS, a simple desktop tool opens the content staffers need and lets them update it quickly and easily.

Web sites are complex public documents that rely on technologies most of us don't really understand. Content management systems represent an evolutionary step in making them easier to create and maintain. By managing the process of publishing, you can better control your Web site's cost. With the ability to make corrections instantly and create an audit trail, you'll decrease your legal risks. With the right people doing the right jobs, your Web site's operation will be more efficient, and you'll deliver better, more timely information to the people who need it. ■

Resources

Bogossian, John, "Internet Content Management: What's Next for Nonprofits?", *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 19, No. 6.

Hoffman, Leslie & JP Frenza, "Building Your Web Site: HTML Basics," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 16, No. 3.

Frenza, JP & Leslie Hoffman, "Fundraising on the Internet: Three Easy Strategies," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 17, No. 4.

These articles are available free at www.snpo.org/members.

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