INTERNET CONTENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS:
What's Next for Nonprofits?

Is your Web site up-to-date, or does it contain yesterday's information? Here's a new approach to nonprofits' biggest Web problem.

BY JOHN BOGOSIAN

Web sites are an increasingly critical tool for nonprofits, used to expand their community presence, build awareness of (and grassroots support for) issues, recruit volunteers, and disseminate information. But creating a Web site is one thing; keeping the content fresh and consistent is something else entirely. This "freshness" challenge can be particularly acute for nonprofits, many of which have limited technology budgets.

In developing the first iteration of their Web sites, the inclination among many nonprofits was to define content narrowly, viewing it less as dynamic and changeable and more as an extension of the organization's printed materials. This approach was in many cases dictated by available software technologies. The result was a "first generation" Web site that was largely static, lacking in interactivity, and difficult to update.

Content management requires an HTML programmer to post new material.[1] Since many nonprofits don't have such a person on staff, much of this work is contracted out. Even if nonprofits do have such specialists in house, Web site mainte-nance gets added to a long list of responsibilities. Either way, content management quickly becomes an inefficient process.

As more nonprofits embrace the Internet as an interactive communications tool, they face this increasingly common hurdle, sometimes called the "Webmaster bottleneck." Organizations caught in the Webmaster bottleneck are unable to keep fresh, up-to-date content on their Web site because of the need to route new material through an individual with HTML programming skills. The process is time-consuming and expensive. Forrester Research estimates that as much as 55 percent of the development and maintenance costs for most Web sites are taken up by content management.

Building a More Efficient MOUSE

MOUSE (Making Opportunities for Upgrading Schools and Education), a New York-based nonprofit founded in 1997 to provide volunteer manpower and technical support to the New York City public school system, found itself facing just such an issue when it launched its Web site.[2]

As a technology-oriented organization, MOUSE viewed its Web site as critical. It used its site to recruit volunteers and dispense information. The first generation of its Web site, www.mouse.org, was largely static, and the task of adding content often fell to executive director Sarah Holloway, who alone among the staff had the requisite HTML programming skills.

"Adding content was a slow, burdensome process and it took Sarah away from her real responsibility, which was running the organization," says Cheri Tompkins, director of special projects at MOUSE. "As a result, we weren't always able to post new information as quickly as we wanted."

To address this bottleneck, MOUSE installed a new-generation tactical content management system. This system allows those responsible for creating Web content to post that content to the Web site. No special training or programming skills are required. As a result, the site can be updated much more frequently and

its functionality expanded. For example, the organization recently developed a projects page to provide site visitors with an update on work underway and will soon be adding a Resources Guide for teachers and administrators detailing the "best practices" for bringing students online.

"With our content management system, if we decide to add a page we can," says Tompkins. "We don't have to bring in a lot of technical resources since our non-technical managers are able to oversee all our site configuration and administration."

MOUSE also relies on its content management system to help it better manage its list of 1,200 volunteers. "Our organization is entirely volunteer driven," Tompkins comments. "The ability to efficiently deploy these individuals in projects around the city is the key to our effectiveness."

Visitors to the MOUSE Web site who wish to volunteer are asked to fill out a short sign-up sheet, listing their name and e-mail address and specifying their areas of interest and technical expertise. The individual's contact information is added to the appropriate category. When MOUSE needs volunteers with specific skills, program managers simply select a category, draft a memo describing the project, and contact the appropriate list via e-mail. Volunteers e-mail back their availability, and a project team is assembled.

"Before, we were maintaining a number of separate databases of volunteer talent. Putting together a team for any particular project was both labor and time intensive," says Tompkins. "By eliminating adminis-trative overhead and redundant databases, we can spend more time serving our public school constituency."

One-to-One vs. Many-to-Many

Most Web content management systems continue to rely on a one-to-many concept of publishing—that is, an individual or department acts as author or clearinghouse for all the organization's Web content. This model works fine in the traditional publishing business but is not well suited to the Web. As the volume of information destined for the Web site accelerates—and the demand to keep the site current becomes increasingly important—work inevitably backs up. The Webmaster, once part of the solution, is now part of the problem.

A better Web publishing model has started to evolve, as evidenced by the MOUSE application. Under this many-to-many model, those who create content may also publish that content to the Web site. By using an intuitive, browser-based interface, next-generation content management systems give non-technical users control over when, where, an how that content gets posted.

Major consulting firms are taking notice of the content management problem. In a recent report, "A Framework to Manage Pervasive Content," the Yankee Group notes: "Important as it is, today's Web content is often stale, inconsistent, and inaccessible." The authors of the report note pointedly that the Web is plagued by "too much content and not enough management."

The solution to this problem is to view content management as an ongoing process that begins with inception of new content and is continually managed through its distribution, delivery, and performance. This view differs from historically passive document management systems (DMS), whose purpose was primarily data capture, workflow record processing, and storage, rather than collaborative content development and usage. Document management systems assumed that static documents were being provided to a relatively limited audience. Content management systems are based on the assumption that site content is provided by, and for, a broad audience that extends beyond the organization, and are therefore Web-based.

Attacking the Bottleneck

Clearly, it's time for nonprofits to address the content management problem. Luckily, new technologies have evolved that let them re-engineer their approach to creating and managing Web content. For nonprofits, there are three key features that should figure prominently in any content management software:

- The software should have an intuitive, non-threatening interface that encourages interaction.

- It should contain authoring tools that allow content providers to create material using the standard word processing programs with which they are familiar.

- The system must allow the same non-technical personnel to manage the flow of content to the site.

Within the many-to-many publishing model, a hierarchical framework is perhaps the best structure for main-

taining control. In such a system, registered users are assigned to groups, and the page privileges of each group are defined, letting the Web site's managers control the site down to the individual page level. The extent to which users can create, edit, and publish Web content is dependent on their pre-determined access privileges. Approval of a designated editor or editors is required before content can be posted. This encourages content creation and speeds its deployment to the Web without sacrificing control. As with content creation itself, creating groups and setting access privileges can be done by non-technical personnel.

Moving Forward

Will your organization benefit from a next-generation content management system? Ask yourself the following:

- Are you planning to increase the volume of the content on your Web site?

- Are you using your Web site to launch new initiatives, special projects, fundraising campaigns, or other time-sensitive efforts?

- Is an ever-larger portion of your budget being spent on content maintenance?

- Can your existing content management process implement updates and deliver needed changes instantaneously?

- Are there systematic procedures in place for effective and efficient content quality control?

- Does your existing content management process provide for a single, end-to-end view of the entire content management cycle, or is its focus limited to editing and publishing content?

The answers to these questions will help determine whether your organization's Web site is a good candidate for an upgrade to the next generation of content management system software. Keep in mind that as Web sites increasingly become more of an integrated part of a nonprofit's outreach and management efforts, next-generation content management systems will become a necessity. Nonprofits that want to use the Web as a truly dynamic communications tool will need to move beyond sites with static Web pages and embrace the next level of Internet technology. ■

Footnotes

[1] See "Building Your Web Site: HTML Basics," *Nonprofit World,* May-June 1998, and "Choosing an HTML Editor: Software Reviews," *Nonprofit World,* July-August 1998.

[2] Nonprofit MOUSE was created as a privately funded effort to help bring the New York City school system into the online world, drawing talent and resources primarily from the new media and e-commerce companies of New York's Silicon Alley. The organization currently manages programs in 24 New York City public high schools and has provided an estimated $3 million worth of technical expertise and support to the school system. Its 1,200+ volunteer technology professionals have spent a collective 40,000 hours working in the public schools, building networks and solving technology problems. In the past year alone, MOUSE volunteers have put 50,000 teachers and students online in New York City schools. MOUSE draws its volunteers from many of the city's most high-profile dot-com companies, including Jupiter Communications, SonicNet, Starmedia, and Y3K, in addition to such traditional corporations as Time-Warner, Sony, NBC, and The New York Times.

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