



CMS for Your Business: Managing Website Content without Managing Website Code

History

Not that long ago, a website was merely an online version of a business card. The primary purpose of most websites was simple: basic online presence. Static brochure-like content was published and often set in stone for months or even years at a time. Spending money on deploying a content management system was simply not worth the investment. Instead, marketing departments would pass on the next round of web updates to HTML coders who would make the changes to the site manually. The bottom line is: the sites didn't undergo frequent content changes, and therefore it made more business sense to hire an HTML coder to handle the occasional content updates instead of investing in a content management system.

For most industries these times are long gone. Not having a flexible content management process in place can hurt your business, as current and relevant web content is now becoming an important step in building your relationship with your customers:

1. Visitors no longer come to your website just to see if you have one and what it looks like. As the web continues to grow as the most vastly used informational and marketing media, your potential customers come to your site for answers and expertise relative to their needs. If the content they see is stale or irrelevant, they will quickly click the "Back" button and visit your competitors.
2. Frequently updated and information-rich content will help you rank higher with the search engines and make others refer to your site.
3. New content, relevant content, timely response to new issues or comments to questions that arise in your industry tell your potential customers that you are alive and up-to-speed with what's going on.

Unless you and other key content contributors in your organization are pretty comfortable with HTML, you need a web content management system to facilitate content changes and updates.

Selecting a content management system is a challenge for everyone, and especially for small and medium businesses, as options are abundant, and intensive research is needed to make sure you make the right choice for your budget and needs.

Your basic options can be grouped as follows:

- Purchase a commercial CMS
- Customize an open-source CMS
- Build a CMS from scratch
- Subscribe to a service-based CMS

The purpose of this paper is to provide some general guidance in the CMS selection process for a small or medium business, by comparing the benefits and drawbacks of each of the four choices.

Option One: Commercial CMS

You get what you pay for. And if you are willing to pay a lot (upfront and ongoing), you'll get a product with an abundance of features, dedicated support and well-defined service level agreements.

The pluses:

Most benefits of a commercial CMS are due to the simple fact that a commercial CMS is backed and distributed by a well-established financially-driven organization and is built for enterprise-level customers with a large number of users. Therefore companies that choose to implement a commercial CMS typically enjoy a very comprehensive and robust set of features, a greater level of dedication and stability from their CMS vendor (an established commercial organization is less likely to close shop), as well as good documentation, training and support.

The minuses:

- **Price.** The most noticeable one is, of course, price – from the initial price you pay for licensing, to additional deployment and customization cost, to ongoing maintenance fees.

Most of the initial licensing cost of a commercial CMS start at \$15,000 and go up, averaging \$300,000-\$500,000. Licensing costs often depend on the number of users: the more content editors your organization has, the more you pay. When you take customization, configuration and deployment efforts into account, the average deal size goes well into 7-digit figures.

- **Complexity** that may not be necessary.

As commercial CMS are targeted towards larger companies, they come with a complex and highly configurable array of features. Vignette, for instance, supports content publishing to multiple sites, including intranets, extranets and mobile devices. Documentum and File Net support comprehensive document and storage management, workflow management and version control. Many others come bundled with various enterprise-level functions: collaboration tools, integration with the existing corporate infrastructures, and rich media creation support.

For most small and medium businesses that simply need to manage their web content, such enterprise-level complexity is often not needed, and is rather more burdensome than useful. Even if the high price tag was not an issue, the complexity is a hurdle in the user adoption process, as learning how to use the system requires a lot more effort – initially and moving forward, as the new employees need training.

Option Two: Open Source CMS

The main reasons behind the popularity of open source content management systems are the price and the open license to modify the software. The initial (download) price of an open source CMS is significantly cheaper than that of a commercial CMS, if not 100% free. As with other open source projects, because the code is "open", the opportunities for in-house customization of an open source CMS are also greater than they are for a commercial CMS.

The pluses:

- Free or low cost of software purchase.
- Customizable (in-house development staff can modify the code and add new features).

The minuses:

- Weak or non-existing support: in many cases you are on your own or at the mercy of forums and online user communities. There is a good reason behind the fact that open-source software is free or cheap: it is supported by a community of passionate volunteer developers, not by a commercially-driven organization. As a result, often there are no future guarantees, and no customer service department to offer assistance. Can you handle delays in fixes and upgrades due to the lack of support?
- Lack of documentation and training (for that same above reason).
- Because most open-source projects are not backed by a solid financially-driven organization, they are not viewed as "stable" enough. In other words, the open source project can close, or its developer pool may not show a strong level of commitment, and as a result the product will lack the upgrades it needs to stay on the competitive edge.
- And most importantly - the cost of the initial purchase may be free or none, but what about the total cost of ownership of the CMS for your organization? Ideally, you could find an existing open source CMS that fulfills all your requirements. In the real world, however, the needs of every organization are different. Every CMS needs to be customized, at a minimum, to reflect the functional needs of your business, and the look-and-feel of your brand. And often, to include additional functional features that are unique to your business model.

As your organization evolves, your content management system needs to grow as well. Ongoing development support is needed over the life span of your CMS to reflect industry changes, integrate new workflows, and troubleshoot any issues. CMS implementation is an evolving process. The cost of ANY CMS implementation involves:

Over the course of the first 1-6 months

- Software installation and setup
- Initial customization of templates and functionality

- User training and internal adoption by end users

Over the course of the following 3-5 years

- Troubleshooting when things go wrong
- Security management
- Ongoing support and upgrades
- Training new users
- Ongoing modifications to interfaces, templates and functionality

The real question is: does your organization have the IT resources necessary to handle all the above, during the initial implementation stages and over the course of the following few years? If it doesn't, then the task of managing the technology behind the CMS may be too much to handle. As a result the organization ends up being stuck with an inefficient or broken piece of software that most internal stakeholders refuse (or simply cannot) use – the situation we have witnessed too many times.

This is especially true when it comes to ongoing support and upgrades. If your business continues to grow (and let's assume it does) in today's fast-paced and highly-competitive market, your CMS will need to expand as well. It is a very sad situation when an inflexible framework of the content management system is getting in the way of making a few simple modifications to your site.

Conclusion: open source CMS is a good match if:

- You have strong in-house IT staff to support the software.
- The system's built-in list of features mostly fits your needs as-is, or
- The application's internal architecture is flexible to support additional functional customization.
- The open-source CMS has been around for a while, there is a reliable support system (either based on the user community or provided by the vendor) to ensure that you get help when you need it.

Option Three: Custom CMS Built from Scratch

It is a well-known fact that most developers would rather write new code than build on someone else's. However, be aware that in today's market the drawbacks associated with building a custom CMS from scratch in most cases far outweigh the benefits.

The pluses:

- Highly customizable: a CMS can be built from the ground up to suit precisely the list of features and design required by your organization.

The minuses:

- Higher cost of ownership and additional complexity associated with the development, maintenance, testing and trouble-shooting a 100% custom application, especially considering the fact that most development projects run over timelines and budget.
- Lengthy implementation cycle required for development and testing of the 100% custom solution.
- Higher management effort to define the requirements, oversee and streamline the development process and ensure that proper documentation is written and kept current.
- Ongoing maintenance, upgrades, and troubleshooting still remain the same issue as in Option Two (customizing an open-source CMS) or can prove to be even more difficult if the solution's infrastructure wasn't well thought-out by an original developer (especially if the original developer leaves the company).

Conclusion: Unless your organization is planning on selling the CMS to others or if your needs are more than 50% unique and cannot be accommodated by an existing software, the high cost of ownership related to developing a custom CMS can be difficult to justify.

Option Four: CMS as a SaaS, or Hosted CMS

Background:

The SaaS (or software as a service) software distribution model has recently experienced a fairly steep and consistent increase in popularity. The idea behind SaaS is that a customer doesn't pay for the ownership of the software, but rather for using it. The customer leases the software while the vendor takes care of hosting, availability, troubleshooting, maintenance, security and upgrades. With SaaS the customer can get up and running fairly quickly and avoid the lengthy implementation cycle and high upfront costs.

According to Gartner, "The worldwide software-as-a-service (SaaS) market reached \$6.3 billion in 2006 and is forecast to grow to \$19.3 billion by year-end 2011".

The SaaS (software as a service) model is gaining popularity in project management, bug tracking, leads management, e-commerce, contact management and other types of software where common vanilla processes are shared by all and little or no customization is required. The pure SaaS model does not work as well for CMS, since the level of customization required by most content management system is a lot more complex. If a logo upload and some look-and-feel adjustments may be all that's needed to customize a SaaS-based project management system, customization efforts involved in most CMS implementations are a lot more sophisticated. At a minimum, the CMS needs to render your custom web design on the front-end (in today's world it's hard to be perceived as cutting-edge while offering a template-looking cookie cutter website to your visitors). Custom web design alone cannot be rendered by a CMS without additional configuration or development effort. In many cases, additional development effort is needed to provide the specific features required by each organization.

As a result, the term “Managed CMS” is more appropriate when it comes to labeling content management as a service. In addition to hosting, maintaining and upgrading the content management software, your managed CMS vendor also takes care of all the customization and configuration work (initial and ongoing). You tell the vendor what you need, they do the work.

The pluses of CMS as SaaS or Hosted CMS when it comes to small and medium businesses:

- Greatly reduced initial setup cost and implementation time.
- Greatly reduced total cost of ownership.
- No need to maintain additional IT staff to learn, customize and maintain the new software.
- Greater risk reduction: since the initial costs are fairly low and the vendor is being paid over the course of an on-going relationship with you, rather than upfront, the vendor has more incentive to provide reliable support and keep you happy. As a result, the odds of a successful CMS implementation are fairly promising.

The minuses of CMS as SaaS or Hosted CMS when it comes to small and medium businesses:

The negatives associated with hosted CMS have more to do with the quality of service provided by a specific CMS vendor, or when a different deployment model makes more sense:

- If your list of requirements matches the list of features provided by a commercial CMS vendor and the high price tag is worth it.
- If an existing open source CMS is a good match for your requirements, and your in-house IT staff can handle the setup and maintenance of the CMS, then the open-source CMS may be a better fit.

Conclusion:

The approach you follow when selecting a content management system for your business is mainly based on the three factors:

- Cost (the total cost of ownership)
- Implementation time
- Ability to manage and support the labor associated with the deployment and maintenance of the application

For small and medium business stakeholders, it certainly makes more sense to concentrate on managing the content, and outsource the headaches of managing the technology to a 3rd party service provider. At the end of the day, if you are able to properly mitigate risks associated with IT development and avoid investing too much into a deal that may not work for you (straight up or long-term), you will be in a better position. Managed CMS is a great choice for small-to-medium businesses with simpler content management needs, thinner IT budgets, and limited in-house IT staff.

About eKore

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