ComputerWeekly.com

Guide to buying a Content Management System

How to choose the right Content Management System supplier for your business

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INTRODUCTION

Imagine your website is like the house you live in. A web design agency has built this house for you, a web host has ensured that the house is large enough for your needs, and graphic designers have made the place look good. But what if you want to chuck out some of your old furniture, move things around or update your ageing entertainment system? Doing this on a website is not as easy as it is in reality, which is why you need a Content Management System (CMS) to enable you to do a little spring cleaning and ensure everything is up-to-date and working to the required standard.

A CMS is software which effectively runs your website. Using a CMS, you can add and edit content and control nearly every aspect of your website, so that simple changes can be undertaken quickly and cost effectively without the need for specialist technical knowledge. Additionally, CMS software call include all sorts of functionality, including user accounts, message boards, photo galleries and even online shopping systems.

All but the very smallest websites or those which never change could benefit from the use of a CMS, whether it is simply to enable you to make changes to the site, or to run a large online community.

Content Management Systems are not exclusively web-based (though this is probably their main use today) and can be used for corporate intranets or other electronic documentation systems.

This guide gives you an overview of Content Management Systems, their features and benefits and some of the most commonly used software packages. There's also some advice for choosing a company to set up your CMS and a guide to prices.

CONTENT MANAGEMENT

Running a web site can be very expensive and time consuming. Once you have taken into account initial design, development and setup, maintenance, modifications and fixing faults, writing, editing and uploading content, there is a lot involved. While you definitely need a professional to build the site for you in the first place, Content Management Systems enable you to write and edit content as well as range of other tasks, obviating the need to pay for every extra bit of information you add, remove or change.

Benefits

Using a CMS on your web site has a number of advantages. Firstly, as previously stated, it enables people without specialist technical skills to write and edit content, as well as adding other media like photos and videos. Most CMS software has a WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) editing capability, so writing for your website is as easy as writing a letter with word processing software, and you can see exactly how the page will appear. This means that you or your staff can maintain the web site directly, which is considerably cheaper than paying a web design company to upload each article or make each change. You can change individual pages of your web site, as well as what options are available to visitors. If your site allows people to register for a user account, you can have full administrative access over them. If you want your site to include features like message boards or photo galleries, these can be easily added to a CMS and managed as part of the overall system.

Aside from allowing you to maintain your web site, using CMS software also opens up a range of possibilities. If your customers or site visitors register user accounts, you will be able to contact them directly through the system, so mass-emails are a possibility. The range of add-ons (or core features) of many Content Management Systems means that you can quickly implement a rich, multi-functional web site. Some systems can integrate directly with popular sites like Facebook. Most will include some sort of a

message board or forum, allowing users to write and reply to messages organised in topics or threads. Other popular website features, like blogs, can be added and made available to all registered users, or just some.

CMS systems generally work by using a template for their design and layout and generating pages by inserting data into the template. Most come with a range of inbuilt templates and have extra ones available to download. The advantage here is that any design work only really needs to be done once, as opposed to on every different page.

In general, CMS systems will render standards-compliant, accessible HTML web pages. This means that you web site is better equipped to be displayed on a range of web browser and computer systems, as well as making it accessible to disabled users. A further advantage is that your web site will, to an extent, already be optimised for search engines.

With a CMS system, you can efficiently and effectively run a large and busy web site which is changed and updated regularly, potentially by a large number of users. You can develop an online community of users and control almost everything about how your site looks and feels, all without any specialist technical knowledge.

CMS features

Below is a more detailed explanation of the core common features which are found in Content Management Systems. This includes a list of potential extensions to the basic software, but without any detail as each of these could warrant a buyer's guide of its own.

Users and access levels

Whether you will be the only person using it or you want to build and grow a large population of users, all CMS systems employ the notion

of user accounts. This means that the power to control and change different parts of the site can be restricted to one or a few users, or only to registered users. Almost all CMS software also allows for different access levels, since there should only be one or a small number of users with full and unrestricted access to the CMS controls. How this is implemented varies between systems, but may involve having different classes of users (administrators, moderators, normal users) and then setting who (i.e. which user classes) can do what. Alternatively, or additionally, access can be controlled per restricted item, per user. Implementing different access levels means you can delegate different areas of work (or play) to different individuals or groups, while still maintaining overall control. For example, you may want one person to write an article, another to review and edit it, but reserve the ability to publish it live on the site until you have had a look.

Document management

The majority of the content on your web site is likely to be text based, and CMS software offers a wide range of features for creating and managing written documents. written documents. You can assign users to work on documents, to be allowed to publish them or only to read them and add comments. A CMS may also provide functions for managing different versions and revisions of documents. This is often used for computer programming projects, for the actual program code as well as any documentation.

There may be a facility to designate some content, articles or pages as static. This means that they are stored in a file rather than a database, so when the content is view, it is loaded straight from the file rather than a database. This is useful if a particular article is very popular and receives a lot of visits, as it helps improve efficiency.

Documents can be set to appear on the site at a given time and disappear at another. This is particularly useful if you want your site to look like it's being updated when no one is actually maintaining it. For example, you could have a special Christmas message appear

without having to actually make any changes to the system on Christmas day. You will also likely be able to see statistics for each piece of content so you can see what is popular and what's not.

Availability

Internet access is becoming ever-more ubiquitous. As such the amount of applications which run solely through web sites is increasing, with innovations such as online, web-based word processors and spreadsheets. The ability to manage your web site from essentially any device with internet connectivity means that you can update your site from virtually anywhere, whenever you want or need to.

Extensibility

As mentioned above, most CMS software is expandable with plug-ins or add-ons. There is a lot that could be said about each of these features, but here we will simply list some of the most useful features that can be added to a CMS (or may well be included by default).

- Forums/message boards and blogs

- New publishing, displaying external news feeds and creating feeds for display on other sites.

- Event calendars, clocks, alarms, user birthday notifications.

- On-site advertising, including integration with external advertising systems like Google AdWords.

- Auction systems, shopping carts and payment systems.

- FAQs, downloads, directories and dictionaries/glossaries

- Photo, video and audio galleries, slideshows and presentations.

- Newsletters, mailing and distribution lists.

- Games, polls and quizzes

- Shout boxes, comments and chat.

Problems

CMS software is not always the right solution, and there are some instances where it is simply not appropriate to use such a system. If your site is very small and rarely or never changes, then the functionality of a CMS will be wasted. Similarly, some CMS software is so full of features that it may be superfluous to your CMS needs.

While CMS software is designed to be easy to use, some training will still be necessary for your staff. Even after such training, some may not fully understand and use all the features of the system. It is possible that using a CMS can add overheads to your business processes which cancel out any benefits.

Using a particular CMS system or a customised or bespoke system designed by one company means that you are, to an extent, locked in to using that software and company. This is particularly true if the company has modified or customised the software for you. Lock in may be a problem if you wish to use a different company, or if you want to move all your stored content to a different CMS. Some systems make this easy, but it is unlikely to be seamless.

CMS SOFTWARE

As with all common web-based application, there are a lot of different CMS software packages available with different features. There are free packages available, which are built and maintained by volunteers, as well as commercial packages, some of which may integrate with desktop applications like Adobe (formerly Macromedia) Contribute. Different CMS software packages have different requirements for the web server on which they are located.

A given CMS supplier will have their own preferred CMS software, and as such will be knowledgeable and experience in using and customising it. There is a possibility that, if you already have a web site and web hosting contract, the company's choice of CMS may not be compatible with your hosting company's servers. Depending on your particular requirements you could look for a different web host, ask the CMS supplier to use a different CMS package, or look for a different supplier.

It is also possible that the supplier uses their own, custom-built software. In this case, they will know the system inside out and be able to tailor it to your exact requirements. Beware, though, as using a company's own proprietary software means that you will either need to use them for any updates or modifications to the software, or pay a lot for a different company to get to grips with the system before amending it.

The supplier should be able to explain their choice of software to you, including how it affects your experience as a user of the system. They should also be able to customise the system to meet your exact requirements, build or source templates or incorporate your own graphic design, and integrate the system with any existing website or database you have. Some of these services may cost a significant amount, depending on the exact details.

CHOOSING A SUPPLIER

Having read this guide, you have a better idea of the available options for CMS systems, so you can establish exactly what you do and don't require. With a set of requirements, you can go on to find the right supplier to implement the system for you. This is where the Approved Index is invaluable – we have a directory of pre-approved, UK based companies. Furthermore, you can complete a simple form on our website to outline your requirements, and receive free, no obligation quotes from up to 6 of our suppliers.

Although we can provide you with a shortlist of suppliers, you will still have to choose one company to work with. The below are some things to consider when making your final choice.

Knowledge

The details of Content Management Systems above are only intended to be an introduction, and any good CMS supplier should be familiar with everything discussed. They should be able to explain the various options to you in more detail, answer any questions you might have, and suggest how best to realise your CMS based web site.

The right software

A CMS supplier should provide you with the most appropriate software for you, with the feature set you require and nothing that you don't. It is also important to avoid being 'locked in' – if a company supplies you with a system that only they can maintain, you will be forced to use that company for maintenance or any changes you require.

Experience

The length of time a company has been in business indicates both their level of experience and how successful they are. Clearly a

company with a long history of providing high quality solutions will be preferable to one which is just starting out. Experience in your industry is a definite plus as it means they will have a better understanding of any subtleties of the sector and how best to tailor your CMS to these.

Price

Obviously you want to get the best value for money, but this does not always mean choosing the cheapest supplier. There's little point making savings on the initial cost of a CMS web site if it does not meet your requirements or if you still have to pay a company to maintain it. Look for the best price for the services you want with a company you feel comfortable working with.

Range of services

Depending on your requirements, you may need more services than just a CMS installation. Most companies will offer a range of related services, which might include graphic design, search engine optimisation or online marketing. It is likely that using one company for all your needs will save you money, but be sure to compare packages with each other and with the option of using a number of different companies, just in case.

Assessing a portfolio

Online portfolios are one of the main ways a company can demonstrate their competence, by exhibiting prior work. Take time to look through companies' portfolios and actually test out the sites. As a web user you can judge for yourself with a site is attractive, easy to use and ultimately successful. A good site should load quickly and be easy to navigate.

Prototypes and demos

A company should be able to give you a demonstration of the CMS software they will supply or even a prototype of your own site. Most free CMS software has some kind of demo online, though it may be more informative to have a look at an established system with a good amount of real content. Remember, the point of CMS is that you can maintain the site, so if you struggle to get to grips with a particular system, you might wish to consider a different one.

Getting references

A CMS supplier should be happy to provide you with a list of satisfied clients as references. This is possibly the most important step in choosing the right company to work with as talking to past clients will give you an idea what the company is like to work with in practice.

There are a number of questions worth asking referees. How well did the supplier communicate with the clients? Did they deliver what was required within budget and to schedule? Has the system stood the test of time or presented any technical problems and is it dynamic and adaptable enough that alterations to the content can be made without difficulty? Be sure to check what sort of customer service the company gives, how responsive they are to problems, and whether there were any surprise charges or costs.

PRICE GUIDE

As with any project, the exact price you pay will depend on your requirements. CMS systems have the advantage that, once set up, you don't need to pay a web designer for every page added to the site, as you can add them yourself.

The pricing structures used by companies can also vary. Some may simply charge a one-off fee for the installation and setup of your CMS and some training for you or your staff on how to use it. The downside of this structure is that any problems, changes or modification which you can't deal with yourself will be subject to a charge from the company. This sort of package will probably cost at least £1,000, rising with additional features, customisation, or post-installation maintenance or support.

Some companies offer CMS systems as part of an ongoing service. The initial price you pay will be lower or even nothing, but you are committed to paying a regular fee, usually monthly. Sometimes your monthly fee will be related to the size of your web site in terms of the number of pages. For example, you could pay £30 per month for a CMS site with 5 pages, £40 for one with up to 100 pages, and an additional £10 per month for an additional 100 page.

The main benefits of paying monthly, aside from a lower or negligible setup fee, are twofold. First, you only pay for what you need, for as long as you need it. Should your requirements change, you won't have wasted money on a bespoke CMS system that you no longer need. Secondly, as you have an ongoing contract, the CMS supplier will maintain your CMS system and solve and problems with it, as well as providing training and support, without any additional charges.

With any CMS project, be sure to check exactly what services are included in your contract and what may result in extra charges.