

A New Answer

CONTENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS EASE THE BURDEN FOR CHURCH WEB SITE DESIGN

by Sally Grantham

Being on the Web is an essential part of doing business in the 21st century regardless of whether you operate in the public, private or nonprofit sector. The big decision most organizations face is how to get there.

For many organizations, they've had a Web site for a few years that hasn't succeeded at becoming a purposeful tool, partially because of the fact that problems occur when trying to maintain the site, keep it updated and provide a simple way to avoid bottlenecks with one person doing all the work.

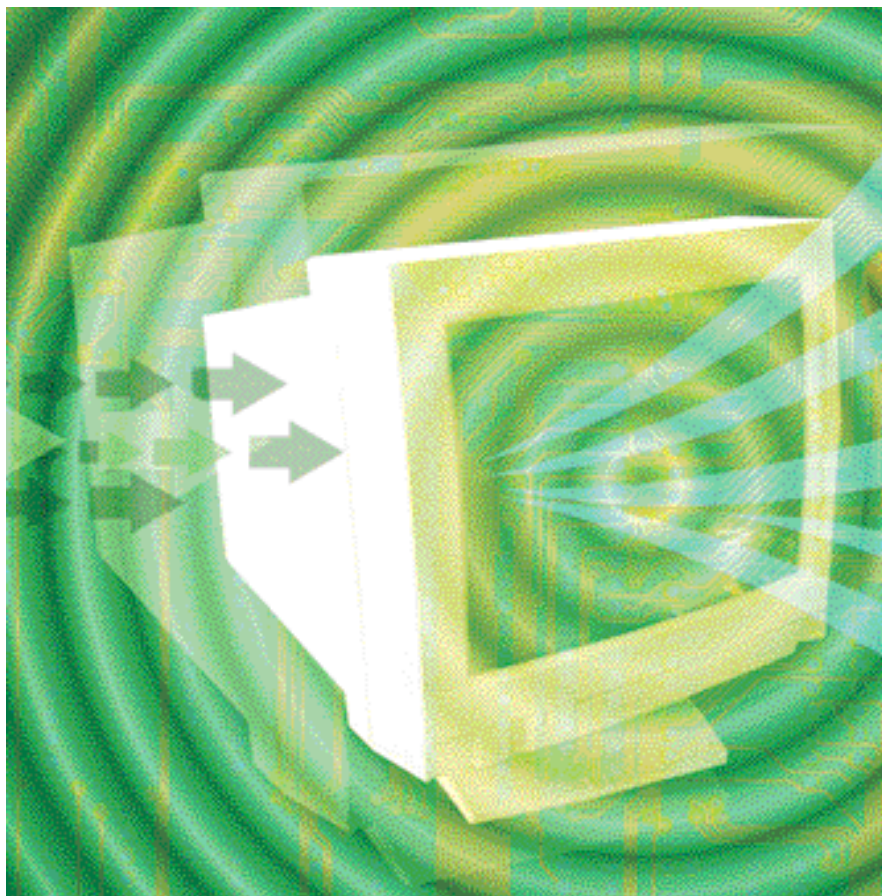
Many organizations still have one Web programmer who takes the brunt of the work on all by himself, converting documents into HTML files and uploading them to the Web site. This person usually handles the graphics and layout of the site as well, all which can become an overwhelming task for anyone.

If you're like many churches out there, you might even have a volunteer responsible for your Web site, which tends to make keeping it current even trickier. Organizations usually find that the Webmaster model leads to a bottleneck in the update process. Due to the fact that content has to flow through the Webmaster for posting to the site, it's relatively easy for this person's workload to become unmanageable.

Manage it, Build it

Enter the concept of content management. In the early-1990s, as the World Wide Web gained popularity and having a Web site started becoming more common for organizations, the idea of "document management" emerged as the need to manage multiple programming languages and control information flow to a Web site became prevalent.

At this point, it was discovered that many of the technology tools being used (many different database and information management programs), were doing much of the same things: Manage large volumes of information and allow the end-user to maximize the value of the information.



Content management systems emerged from this in order to provide a fundamentally similar way to store, retrieve and use content. From this concept, Web content management systems were built to achieve these tasks online through managing the content on a Web site.¹

So what exactly is Web content management, you might be asking yourself? Well, it involves creating, editing and updating the content (text, images, audio and video elements) that makes a Web site attractive to current and potential users.

Content management systems (CMS) provide a workaround for avoiding everything getting piled up on the Webmaster's to do list. Many organizations rely on CMS to overcome the challenges of maintaining a vibrant, engaging Web presence and to alleviate one person being burdened with too much work.

The key to building an effective Web program within your organization is determining which CMS will be most efficient, effective and affordable for your organization. Successful CMS solutions include crucial features (such as defined editorial process, workflow, distributed communications and automated placement) for overcoming the challenges of operating in a Web environment. By providing you with information on what CMS is and how it can help your organization, you should be better equipped to implement a Web strategy that will meet all your needs.

Techies Not Required

One of the greatest benefits of CMS is that it allows technology lame-brains (like most of us), to use this whiz bang software to make ourselves look like Web programming pros, even though clearly we are not.

The best way to describe CMS is that it is a translator. It translates confusing, highly technical programming languages and Web site architecture into easy-to-use software to create Web site content, post it on your site, add images, change the layout and have ultimate control sans technology training.

In addition, CMS has lots of other features that allow for many people to have access to the site and create and post content, but roles can be assigned so that certain people have rights to create content, while other have the ability to place content on a Web site page and make it go live.

Now that some of the benefits of CMS have been explained, here's a brief synopsis of four specific areas to look for in a CMS package:

- ▶ **Defined Editorial Process**—This is a clearly defined system for creating, editing, and approving content. Depending on the size and complexity of the organization, one person may fulfill all roles or roles may be distributed among several individuals. Effective systems allow an administrator to assign content rights to individuals as needed.

- ▶ **Workflow**—A good CMS solution includes a comprehensive and consistent system for creating, revising, and deleting content regardless of where it appears on the Web site. Workflow capability enables users to control and follow content at each stage of development. It lets administrators and managers enter the system, locate content items, and quickly determine their status within the posting process.
- ▶ **Distributed Communication**—A CMS solution should allow authorized system users to view, modify and place content items from anywhere. The best solutions let users work from any Internet-connected computer. Administrative information, such as the creation date and creator of a content item, also should be available to site users with appropriate access rights.
- ▶ **Automated Placement and Deletion**—A good system allows you to input a command that pulls the content automatically and that causes new content to appear at preset times.

One advantage to CMS is that if you happen to benefit from having someone on staff who is technology savvy and knows HTML and other computer languages, that person can work in HTML and program content and layout within the CMS interface.

Flexibility & Accessibility

One of the most valuable benefits from most CMS packages is that the software is Web based. What could possibly provide more flexibility than being able access your CMS to create content and update your Web site from any Internet connection anywhere in the world?

Another aspect of flexibility that's quite important is having the ability to grow your organization and have a CMS that matches your needs. For instance, a small church with only a few hundred members doesn't need the same type of CMS as a large multi-tiered organization would.

A good CMS package should have the ability to grow with your organization and match your current demands as well as those in the future.

For a CMS that will adequately handle your needs, below is a list of components that should be standard with most providers:

- ▶ **Content Manager**—Holds and displays all content items currently pending approval. Provides users with access to the editing and approval process.
- ▶ **Site Editor**—Ensures control of your Web site content. Lets you define editing and updating privileges for administrators and layout publishers.
- ▶ **Publications Manager**—Enables users to update published content automatically.

- ▶ **Workflow**—Lets you define distinct editorial process roles for managing the flow of information.
- ▶ **Media Manager**—Enables users to upload, manage and share images. Some CMS programs allow you to manage and post MS Office documents, music files, Zip files and Flash files.
- ▶ **Administration Tools**—Gives you the power to manage and update your own Web site.

Behind The Web Curtain

Although the point of CMS is to offer tools for those who aren't trained to be a Web designer, it is important that potential buyers ask the right questions in order to ascertain the stability of a CMS:

- ▶ What Internet backbone does the CMS use? By using a strong backbone provider like UUNET, organizations benefit from having a direct provider of Internet power to make sure their site has minimal downtime.
- ▶ Is there a failsafe if a server crashes? The CMS provider should have backup servers to handle the Web traffic in the event of a downed server.
- ▶ How often are backups done? A good CMS should provide daily backups of full system backups.
- ▶ How secure is my site? Servers should be monitored 24/7 to ensure that no viruses or hackers steal valuable information or down servers.
- ▶ How is site performance maintained? An effective way for CMS to handle heavy site traffic is by utilizing a load-balancing system to handle traffic and ensure that your site doesn't go down.

Asking the right questions is half the battle with CMS. Making sure that your CMS is secure and stable is extremely important when working with technology to help run your organization.

All additional tools and services such as online donation tools, online calendaring features and media streaming should be integrated with one another and seamless, meaning you shouldn't have to install any software on your computer—everything should be integrated with the Web-based CMS package. ❖

Reference

- 1 "Solving the Great Content Management Debate: Trend of True-blue Necessity of the Web Economy," by George Parapadakis, Cap Gemini Ernst & Young, 2002.

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