

GAINING A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE THROUGH YOUR CMS

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A White Paper from Fusion Workshop

By Chris Short

Gaining a competitive advantage through your CMS

By Chris Short, Managing Director, Fusion Workshop

Introduction

In an environment where the web and intranet has become mission-critical for so many organisations, the Content Management System (CMS) at the core of the online presence is a company asset that has perhaps been overlooked. And for those companies that are 'of the web' rather than just 'on the web' it could help them not only survive in tough times but even give them a competitive advantage.

So how do you go about understanding the stake your company has in its CMS and the true value to all your stakeholders? Having recognised the importance of this tool, how do you measure the ROI to your business? This paper examines how to gain a better understanding of your investment in a CMS, what good content management means for the business and protecting your investment while meeting your online needs - and leveraging a good well-implemented CMS to help shape your strategy. Plus how your CMS investment may not be delivering for your organisation or where you are being locked into a poor investment.

The value of a well-implemented enterprise CMS

The value to the organisation in a well-implemented, enterprise CMS can be encapsulated in areas such as:

- A clear Information Architecture that can evolve with the organisation
- Business-driven requirements analysis, to identify and address stakeholder needs
- Custom yet portable functionality
- Content which can be stored in a structured way and re-used in other channels
- Integration with a CRM and other business systems to deliver personalised content
- Cultural benefits and better informed skilled staff
- Adoption and recognition within the organisation to shape and communicate the organisation's business strategy
- Appropriate and manageable look and feel, and a reduction in creative spend
- Good quality templates and style sheets
- Clean implementation of analytics for marketing to inform acquisition strategy
- Customer recognition and loyalty for improved retention

Set against this, the licence cost of the CMS is often the lowest value element - easily offset by the value offered to stakeholders over even a short period. Over time this leads to a compelling ROI argument. A CMS that is aligned with the business goals and serves its stakeholders well, can be seen as a competitive advantage. But only if it is implemented correctly!

Common problems with a legacy CMS

When a CMS is business-critical and has increasing demands upon it, it is becoming clear that web and design agencies are simply not set up to cope with this level of complexity. Or where an in-house system is used, historically multiple departments have worked in silos to meet their own goals. In all cases, budgets are coming under increasing pressure so the need to deliver strong ROI is becoming ever more urgent.

In Fusion Workshop's experience, there are three main scenarios where an organisation has found itself in a CMS dead-end:

The home-grown CMS and its true cost

A home-grown CMS typically has limited features and simply cannot match those in a supported product. After all, a commercial CMS may have upwards of 250 man years of development effort invested in its architecture and out-of-the-box features. Features that are supported by a good commercial product come as a result of user feedback, trends, recognised best practice and are delivered under a formal product management and release process – and these are unlikely to be addressed comprehensively and cleanly in an in-house system.

Rather than being on a well considered roadmap, in-house developers are forced to play 'catch-up' to keep pace with the increasing demands from stakeholders. An example would be the needs of a Marketing department where search engine visibility and compliance with accessibility and usability standards are high on the priority list but are unlikely to have been built in to a custom CMS. This leads to a situation where already stretched IT teams are retro-fitting features, which is not only costly but often difficult to accomplish elegantly.

Custom functionality is often developed in an ad-hoc manner and certainly not in a way that would enable it to be deployed outside of the CMS or within another CMS. In-house IT staff are a valuable resource and it is simply not good use of their time to have them developing functionality from scratch when it is available as plug-and-play features in a good commercial CMS. Further issues surface when platform alignment is required. Integration with other systems – e.g. a CRM – causes pain and erodes ROI.

Finally, training for users can be difficult to deliver in the ad-hoc environment of a home-grown CMS, leading to poor adoption of the system and lack of buy-in.

The Proprietary or Agency CMS and associated risks

Being locked into a proprietary agency CMS brings its own issues, with continual investment in custom functionality development and support. There may be benefits in terms of some functionality reuse where another agency customer has developed a feature and this is sold at less than development cost to other agency customers. However, it is unlikely that the "feature" has been developed in a way that would suit the majority of users and there are bound to be compromises. In other words, you are often getting someone else's 'hand me downs'.

Agencies that position themselves as "digital marketing agencies", 'web design agencies' or 'full service agencies' can often fall short on critical aspects of an effective CMS that demand a formal approach to customer needs and specialist skill sets.

The other danger areas include:

- Possible security vulnerabilities

- Poor editing and content administration features
- Lack of integration with Microsoft Office® products
- Non-standard approach to content storage
- Unorthodox approaches to application architecture
- Unable to cope with step changes such as Web 2.0
- Difficult to guarantee search engine visibility and good accessibility
- Not based on best practice
- Unlikely to be product managed
- Lack of an upgrade path
- Poor document management
- Crude content repurposing (if any)

Finally, should the customer wish to switch supplier or the agency undergo change, then this has an immediate risk implication for the organisation. It not only compromises the means to manage the system but raises questions over intellectual property rights and migration issues.

The poorly implemented commercial CMS

The right choice is important in CMS selection but even a system with a good reputation can fail to deliver value if poorly implemented. Typically, it can be sold in to a subsection of stakeholders but fail to meet the needs of those outside the selection process. And often the CMS 'implementation' is treated more as an 'install' with insufficient effort put into considering current stakeholder needs and understanding how the new CMS will be able to deliver as the organisation evolves to suit changing business conditions.

This is often characterised by:

- Inappropriate publishing rules
- Ill-considered and confused Information Architecture
- Poorly developed templates and Cascading Style Sheets (CSS)
- Difficulties for content originators and web editors
- Staff dissatisfaction
- Poor integration with Microsoft Office®
- CMS features not being leveraged or even not enabled
- Features being overused
- The 'Christmas Tree' effect with excess nice-to-have features
- Unstable and insecure sites
- Lack of accessibility
- Poor search engine visibility and return on search engine advertising
- Browser incompatibility
- Unmeasurable usage

Meeting the needs of stakeholders: what's in it for us?

To gain full value from a CMS, it is important to identify the relevant stakeholders and their needs. The approach will differ depending on which type of CMS 'dead-end' the organisation finds itself in - a poorly implemented CMS, an in-house CMS or the agency CMS.

To do this, a useful approach is to measure the current CMS status against the standards of an enterprise CMS. With an understanding of the value of the present setup, the original project aims can be revisited to arrive at an applicable business case. This will be informed by some requirements reaffirmation and requirements gathering based on the current situation. The types of tools and techniques employed to assess and describe requirements could include: Interviews, workshops and brainstorming sessions, prototyping, research, benchmarking - moving on to proof of concept investigation, scenarios and user journeys.

The requirements will address the needs of each stakeholder type. For example, CMS 'Users' define the system's functionality and ultimately make use of it. 'Assessors' are interested in the system's conformance to standards and legal regulation; 'Testers' test the system to ensure that it is suitable for use, and so on. And as the project progresses, it is important to keep in mind the changing needs of each stakeholder type. This means, running checks at every stage on e.g. compliance, security, marketing needs, and scalability. Testing needs to include testing for vulnerabilities, PCI compliance, and performance under load and browser compatibility.

Stakeholder: a person or group who has an interest in the realisation of a solution

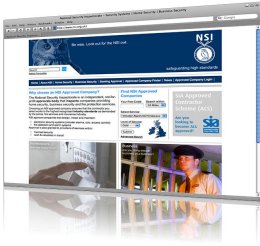
Escaping from a CMS dead-end and your re-implementation or migration strategy

Even in the worst cases we've seen of an ineffective CMS it's rare not to be able to extract some value from the existing implementation. There can be custom functionality that provides a good model for redevelopment, an Information Architecture that we can learn from, and templates & stylesheets that can be reworked and reused. The very fact that the organisation has a CMS shows a potential to develop a culture of being 'of the web' rather than 'on the web'.

And once an organisation has recognised that there are business benefits to operating a well-implemented commercial CMS, the natural step is to plan how to make the change and protect those elements which retain value and can be migrated, such as:

- Information Architecture – if there is a valid structure, then a managed migration will retain that, and build on it without complete architectural re-engineering
- Content – migrate valuable content in a controlled and rigorous way
- How content is stored e.g. reworking of templates and CSS
- Custom functionality – if users are happy with the existing functionality, find out what they like rather than reproducing it, and enhance it by planning and delivery

These areas are often easily remedied in a re-implementation – the value is still there. There are clear benefits of using the available user features as appropriate rather than simply re-inventing what was offered before under a new platform.



Case Study: recovery of poorly-implemented commercial CMS

Situation

The National Security Inspectorate (NSI) is a UK approvals body that has identified online as a primary channel and a website as business-critical. They had selected a market-leading CMS, which was installed by a partner agency. Issues arose when the CMS started to be used in a real-life setting. Once installed, users started noticing problems with areas such as:

- Styling issues due to bad CSS practice
- CMS functionality – lack of cut and paste
- In-site search not returning meaningful results
- Homepage content issues with editing
- Browser compatibility not picked up by testing
- Navigation issues – poor experience
- Security loopholes
- Poor accessibility
- Poorly developed custom functionality

In short, the website was failing almost all of their stakeholders.

Approach

The organisation had suspected that the issues were down to the implementation (although the product was also held responsible) and acted swiftly to address them. Fortunately they had a professional decision-making team composed of IT and Marketing professionals plus board level support. Fusion Workshop were engaged to diagnose and re-implement the CMS and conducted an audit to uncover issues arising from the previous implementation.

The audit resulted in:

- New and appropriate Information Architecture
- Templates and CSS that worked
- Security issues addressed
- Usable search functionality
- Integrated custom functionality
- A solid platform for ongoing development

Outcomes

In the space of two weeks all issues were understood and most were addressed. The implementation resulted in a system that met the NSI stakeholder needs. User experience was vastly improved and assets were protected. Reworked templates and CSS style sheets were implemented. Rather than struggling on with the CMS installation they had, The NSI were able to make the most of their investment with a fully functioning website for their members and meet all web editor needs. Since stabilisation a number of other organisation sites have been moved to this platform along with custom functionality.

Consider the CMS as a platform

Let's remember that a Content Management System is about more than just creating, editing, managing and approving content.

When planning, procuring and implementing a Web CMS the main concerns and drivers are typically over the features that are used to develop, manage and publish online content. The ability of the CMS to facilitate web editors' tasks, secure information and deliver content in ways that enrich the web visitors experience are paramount. That includes being able to repurpose content, render content for different devices, (such as mobiles and PDAs), and ensure that Search Engines are able to index content effectively. But there is significantly more to an effective CMS implementation. Even where the actual content origination and management demands are not high a CMS can add value in many ways.

A feature-rich CMS can shape strategy and reduce ongoing development costs. Features that would normally involve many weeks - or even months - of development are often included, out of the box, or as relatively low cost options, and can be trialed to assess business benefits. But this is still only part of the possible value.

A Web CMS should be considered as a platform. If well delivered it will build on the underlying technology, whether .Net or J2EE, and provide services to deliver business-specific features and data integration services. Crucially, it can result in less development effort than if the features had been developed as standalone applications.

Custom functionality deployed in a CMS will be able to inherit properties from the CMS. Functionality development becomes easier, able to be re-used in different ways throughout a web site and other web systems in the organisation. The CMS can be used to enforce access rules and ensure that content delivered by custom functionality, perhaps derived from other integrated systems, can be rendered in line with publishing rules.

Considered as a platform to deliver custom functionality, a well-implemented CMS provides:

- A wrapper for custom functionality development
- A secure environment for deployment
- Services for exception handling
- Controlled access to different user groups
- Presentation tools and services
- A large reduction in lines of code
- Reduced development timescales
- Reduced testing and better reliability
- Simpler administration and reduced training

And above all, gains come in project clarity, with different teams being able to concentrate on look and feel, templates and CSS builds, and Information Architecture design - while requirements specialists and developers can concentrate on the development of custom functionality and the inherently risky integration aspects of a project.

To sum up, get your CMS implementation right and as well as providing a system for originating, managing and publishing web content, it can also be considered as an environment for custom functionality, integration, QA, consistency, collaboration and evolution. In other words, a well-implemented commercial CMS delivers value to its stakeholders and helps the organisation take a further step towards being 'of the web' not simply 'on the web'.

Summary

Regardless of the type of CMS you are operating there are many aspects to consider. There are bound to be areas that can be improved. But in your quest for improvements and possibly re-development spend some time considering what may be wrong and above all what may be right. Remember, you are not alone - your competitors will be going through a similar thought process.

In reality there are likely to be shortcomings with most online presences. If it is powered by an 'in-house CMS' or an 'agency CMS' then you may want to review your overall strategy. The apparent and hidden costs - medium and long term - will be onerous and may leave you high and dry if there is a technology step change.

There will be areas of great value in your CMS implementation and it is important not to lose the value in the lessons learned. If you have a commercial CMS product at the core of your online presence then it may be worth looking into implementation issues as many good CMS products are simply not properly implemented or utilised. But don't throw the baby out with the bathwater!

If you can ensure that your CMS platform is able to support your organisation's online aims, is stable, usable, meets quality standards and can be independently managed, then for creative needs you can select an agency for what they are best at, design, content, and interactive segments. But ensure that whoever implements your CMS, they understand the real issues so you get the full benefit and all the benefits that follow.

About Fusion Workshop

With almost a decade of operationally critical web development experience, Fusion Workshop have a mature customer base and have carried out over 70 CMS implementations, many requiring rigorous compliance with industry legislation. The company has specialist integration experience with eCommerce, ticketing, access control, CRM, ERP, accounting and bespoke systems.

Fusion Workshop is led by founder and MD, Chris Short. Experienced in many areas of software development management, Chris has a lifetime of experience in systems analysis and development and is the technical lead with a strong focus on methodologies and business processes. Senior management are supported by a team of professionals qualified and accredited in their specialist areas.

Fusion Workshop's business-driven processes deliver high performance web and eBusiness applications. A well developed roadmap aligns clients' needs with best practice, standards and relevant aspects of Web 2.0, resulting in scalable, future-proof, integrated web sites and intranets – that follow best practice in accessibility, usability and SEO. Their methods ensure effective communication, structured project management (PRINCE2) from initial consultancy through specification and development to project delivery and ongoing support.

Hosting: all infrastructures is owned and managed by Fusion Workshop, from the Cisco Firewall through to the backup carousel, which gives full control and means any work can be done when needed. Fusion Workshop also provides full management of the server infrastructure with: Service level agreements, advanced real-time 24x7 monitoring, Server IIS Management, OS Management, and more.

Fusion Workshop is a Gold Partner with the market-leading Immediacy CMS from Alterian and can offer customised, high-performance, standards-based web and intranet applications.

Customers are spread across the UK, with sectors including: Government, Health, Education, Aerospace, Mail order/retail, Manufacturing, Legal, Automotive, Hospitality, Travel and Finance. Fusion Workshop has developed long-standing relationships with many organisations including: Girlguiding UK, Creditsafe, Easyoffices, Wales Millennium Centre, The National Security Inspectorate, ALARM, Flying Brands, and Bluestone.

Fusion Workshop Limited
Quebec House
Cowbridge Road East
Cardiff
CF23 5HP
Company Number: 03749987

Contacts:
Chris Short, Managing Director
02920 66 66 55
Chris.short@fusionworkshop.com
www.fusionworkshop.com