

Following the Guiding Principles of Content Management

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Content management is about getting the right information to the right person at the right time—at the right cost. By using the Internet as its primary publication medium, content management affords people much greater access to the information they need. When approaching content management, keep in mind that your Web site needs to organize, classify and store digital content efficiently so that it is easy for visitors to access that content.

What You Need to Know

What's so important about content management?

Because there is so much information in the world and so little time! Think of content as the formal expression of an organization's intellectual capital, and that such capital increasingly defines the value of an organization. Yet organizations produce vast and ever-expanding quantities of content every year, the majority of it in digital form. By 2001, it was estimated that there were over 550 billion documents on Internet, intranet, and extranet Web sites. Without professional content management, it becomes almost impossible to find what you're looking for.

Why has the Internet become such a popular medium for publishing content?

HTML, the layout language that is used to present Web content, has become the standard form in which digital content is now published. The Web browser, which is designed to view HTML pages, is a simple yet powerful tool that millions of people around the world use every day. For the first time in history, the Internet opens the entire, vast library of digital content to the world.

What are the drawbacks?

As Steve Case, former chairman of AOL Time Warner, has stated, the Web makes every enterprise a publisher. In so doing, though, it has opened the floodgates of information overload. Much of what is published on the Web lacks professional publishing standards. The early Web also depended on manual HTML editing and manipulating HTML files to manage content. This approach mirrors what hand knitting is to the fabrics industry—beautiful results can be achieved for small amounts of content; but, for large amounts, it is a slow and expensive process. Such quantities need content

management software to streamline publishing processes and store content efficiently within a database environment.

What to Do

Justify the Publication of *All* Content

Professional content management is an expensive process. As you begin to post Web pages, keep in mind that all content is not equal in terms of value to your potential audience. You need to establish a business case for publishing content on your intranet or Internet Web site. A core business case will emerge from statements like, "Delivering quality content to our customers will generate more sales and reduce support calls."

Too often, organizations think of content as a low-level commodity that merely needs to be stored. But content is a critical resource, and its value lies in being sought and read. There is no point in having a great technical document if nobody knows it exists. Nor is there any point in storing that great technical document on a Web site if nobody knows the Web site exists and never visits it. To make content management work, you really need to (1) understand who needs your content, and (2) ask potential readers what content they need. And always remember that content is consumed by *busy* people.

Analyze the Situation

Before developing a content management strategy, it is important to understand how both your organization and its industry currently manage content. If there is already a Web site similar to the one you propose to build, ask:

- What content is being published on it?
- Is it up-to-date and accurate?
- Is it being read?
- What are our competitors doing on their Web sites?
- Are they enjoying success?
- Are there any standards emerging for content management within our industry?

Analyze Your Needs

To work out your needs, answer a series of questions, beginning with, “How much content do we need to manage?” Other questions will follow, which demand total, ruthless objectivity:

- What’s the “must-have” versus the “nice-to-have” content?
- Should it be written in American English or British English? What other languages does it need to be published in?
- What are the media we want to publish it in (Web, e-mail, mobile)?
- What content forms will be required (text, audio, video)? Will we need to deal with PowerPoint(r) slides and Word(r) documents? If so, how will we convert them?
- How sensitive is the information we will publish, and how will we protect it from unauthorized eyes?

Don’t get carried away. A golden rule of publishing is that *less* invariably tends to be more. You may have 50,000 documents, but only 5,000 of them matter to the audiences you want to reach.

Create Content

There are a number of options available for creating content, including:

- Commissioning content, either from internal staff or from freelance authors
- Acquiring content from third-party sources such as commercial databases—without infringing on prevailing copyrights
- Using online community-created content created from, say, discussion boards, chat forums, or mailing lists

Develop the Key Functions

- *Editing* content means preparing it for publication. This will require ensuring tone and style are appropriate and consistent, checking for correct grammar, checking for any instances of libel or copyright infringement, and seeing that the correct metadata is included. Editing also requires correcting already published content and reviewing it to ensure that it is still accurate and up-to-date.
- *Publishing* content means posting it on a Web site in a professional manner. It requires choosing what to highlight on a home page, managing subscription-based publishing processes and publishing schedules, and responding to reader interaction and feedback.

- *Promoting* content is a final key task. Remember, if you don't tell the right people what you have published, how will they know it exists?

Work As a Team

Content doesn't grow naturally in databases! Content management software will make the publishing process far more efficient and cost-effective, but assuring quality content takes quality people to create, edit, and publish it. The ideal director of a content management project is someone with editorial and communication skills. Information architecture is vital, too. It's one of several core skills a project requires; others are moderating expertise (if there are to be online communities), marketing, technical and graphic design skills, and usability expertise. It's unlikely that any one member of your team (if you have one) will have all the necessary skills, so it may be better and more cost effective to hire the services of a company that specializes in Web publishing.

Design *Your* Information Architecture

Good design of metadata (essentially "data about data") and classification is crucial to the success of content management. Otherwise, you will simply pile massive amounts of information into a database where it will be almost impossible to find any one page of information quickly, if at all.

Navigation is like a signpost system. It is there to help people to find their way easily and logically around a Web site. Searching is a basic activity on the Web, and a professional Web page design will be crucial to your site's overall success. Graphic design and layout should ensure that content is presented in an attractive style; but being able to be easily read, viewed or heard remains the top priority of your site. As always, form still follows function.

Select the Software That Best Fits Your Needs

If your Web site contains more than a several hundred pages and needs regular updates, then acquiring content management software will make sense. Basing your specifications on the factors, processes and steps that already have been explained will help deliver professional results. So use your specifications to judge which content management software can best meet your organization's content management needs.

Define Ways to Measure the Task and Its Steps

Content quality is almost always difficult to measure. However, that does not mean that measuring devices should not be put in place. You do need to establish methods to determine how much content needs to be created each week, the quality of that content, and the time it takes to get it published. Information architecture, for instance, measures include the quality of the metadata, how easy the site is to navigate, how well the search procedure works, and how quickly Web site visitors can download various pages.

What to Avoid

You Don't Make a Strong Business Case

While the Internet boom was in full swing, many content management projects did not have to show a strong business case. The situation is now very different. Without having a clear business justification and return-on-investment rationale, don't expect content management projects to receive the required funding to succeed.

You Don't *Manage* the Content

Content management is not an "all you can eat" affair. The goal is not digitizing every document you can find and shoving it onto a Web site. Data management focuses on simply storing content, while content management must focus on: (1) identifying the content that's worth publishing and (2) getting it published. There is a vast difference between the two.

You Think That Fancy Software Will Solve All Your Problems

Don't kid yourself! Content management software is vital if large quantities of content are involved. Even so, content follows the classic "garbage in, garbage out" rule. No amount of great software will transform poor quality content into good content. Without putting the people in place to create, edit and publish content, the whole exercise will be futile.

Your Web Sites Contain Out-of-date Content

A key problem on the Web today is outdated (and thus inaccurate) content. Many Web sites hosts forget to remove old content, which leaves visitors having to endure poor and unsatisfied experiences. Studies indicate that an increasing numbers of visitors are viewing Web content as being of dubious and inferior quality. Such an impression hardly serves best interests of host companies.

Where to Learn More

Books:

Diffily, Shane. The Web site Manager's Handbook. Lulu.com, 2007.

Mill, David. Content is King: Writing and Editing On-line. Butterworth-Heinemann, 2005.

Web Sites:

Business 2.0: www.business2.com

Intranet Journal: "Untangling Web Content Management":
www.intranetjournal.com/articles/200004/im_04_18_00a.html

TechRepublic, "Internet content management: a necessary evil?":
http://articles.techrepublic.com.com/5100-10878_11-1028610.html