

Choosing a Content Management System

Choosing a Content management system remains to be an issue for site maintainers and web site owners. The first issue seems to be "Do we need a CMS?". The second issue is, of course, cost.

A common misconception is that there requirement of size before an organization can benefit from a Content Management System. Even small websites can gain valuable benefit from CMS solutions. The key is to pick the CMS that best fits your organizations needs and growth expectations.

And don't be fooled into thinking you have to sell your first born child or a year's wages to get a CMS. There are many different levels of CMS applications and different levels of implementation, both of which effect price.

Let's discuss some of the details of Content Management Systems...

What is CMS?

CMS stands for Content Management System. A CMS is a software system that helps in maintaining and expanding website, often with no knowledge of web languages. The goal to make content and structure expansion easier. A CMS can also help by making maintenance by multiple parties in your organization possible.

CMS applications store their information in a database and generate pages as needed. Many Content Management Systems also cache pages to optimize a website's performance. This means that once a page is requested, it is created and stored on the system until it changes so the page does not have to be created upon every request. This eases the load on your server and makes lessens the expense of hardware requirements.

What does CMS do?

Well, what exactly do you need? A CMS generally manages text articles and templates for a website. Template is just another term for a layout of a page. Generally, a layout is reused multiple times on one website and you can assign a layout to a page in a CMS. You might have a home page layout and another layout for the interior of the website. It is easy to assign the interior template to newly created pages.

Certain CMS systems may also have Permission-based Publishing or Workflow tasks. These features allow customization of the publishing process. Permission-based publishing allows certain roles or people to publish while others can only submit articles for review.

Work-flow tasks allow the creation of certain actions in portions of the publishing process, like alerting an editor that an article is ready for review, or a custom process to approve or disapprove submissions to the publishing system.

The list of features and abilities will differ from CMS to CMS but here are some sample features:

Article management

Layout/template management

Website Search

Content Versioning

Member management/registration

Visitor polling

Online Calendar

Event Management

Role-based Content Access / Permission-based viewing

Permission-based publishing

Collaboration/Groupware support

Workflow Tasks

Categorization of content

Multi-media support

Shopping carts

Ecommerce store-fronts

Payment Gateway Integration

Weblogs/blogs

Wikis

Do you need a CMS?

How many mundane hours are you spending editing HTML? How much are you paying to have a developer edit simple text on your site? How many people are working on the website?

Once you arrive at deciding that you do need a Content Management System and begin your research, you'll see there are countless solutions that exist for managing content and each have their own pro's and con's. However, there are many resources to help you decide which solution best fits your organization's needs.

CMS Matrix is a website that offers side-by-side comparison of various CMS solutions. Wikipedia offers an abundance of information on the terms used in CMS product solutions and the CMS industry on a whole. Don't forget the CMS vendor website as well. Often you'll find the most up-to-date information on the vendors website. Of course, your web development firm is one of your best resources in researching which solution fits your organization best because they know your business and your organization's needs intimately.

How can a CMS be used?

A CMS can be used both for internal and external websites and/or applications. You could publish your corporate website with a CMS. Additionally, you could also use a CMS for an internal intranet.

Some CMS applications are also designed as an API (Application Program Interface), which means adding custom applications can be built using the CMS as a framework saving your organization in development costs.

What is the cost of CMS?

The cost varies depending on the supplier and the implementation. Some Content Management Systems have more features and are inherently more complex than others. WebGUI, for instance, is billed as a CMS but is actually an Application Program Interface (API) so developers can build additional custom applications using the framework of the software and further customize WebGUI with custom modules.

Other implementations may only manage text articles and have minimal additional features and will be less expensive than the more scalable, enterprise CMS solutions.

Plan for growth

Whatever CMS solution you choose, plan for growth and research the features that your organization will need. This will prevent you from having to scrap one software for another and save your organization time and money.

CMS systems are so common-place these days that, often, the cost of implementation is not as expensive as you might think and is easily recovered over a short period of time.

Also, ask about training when purchasing a CMS solution from a web development firm. It's often more cost-effective to include training in the purchase agreement.

Additional Resources

[CMS Matrix - compare CMS software solutions by feature](#)

[WikiPedia - Information on Content Management Systems](#)

[WikiPedia - Enterprise Content Management](#)

About the Author

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