A Beginners Guide To CMS

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Your Options

Like most web jargon, the words "content management system" (CMS) may sound intimidating at first. But almost every modern website depends on them. Most businesses have no option but to use some form of CMS. The challenge is to understand the merits/demerits of each to find one that suits you.

A little Analogy

In the days of yore – that is, the early 90s – websites were mostly static and used to display a fixed bank of information to an academic or tech savvy audience. But as websites were used for more and more activities, including blogs, ecommerce and marketing, the content that administrators required became too unwieldy for static html websites.

A CMS like a magic shop. From the outside it looks like a simple kiosk. Back in the day, shops supplied smaller amounts of particular types of products, so floorspace was limited. To supply large amounts of products, supermarkets had to get bigger and bigger. But what if they could simply restock the shelves to fit more precisely what the consumer is looking for each time they entered the store...

What if they could strip and re-stocking the shelves in milliseconds as the customer steps out and back in. This would mean reduced floor-space and easier navigation for time-strapped consumers. This might be fanciful in the world of brick-and-mortar stores, but in cyber-space the rules change... and anyone with rudimentary computer skills can clear and restock their content as they wish, depending what their user is looking for!
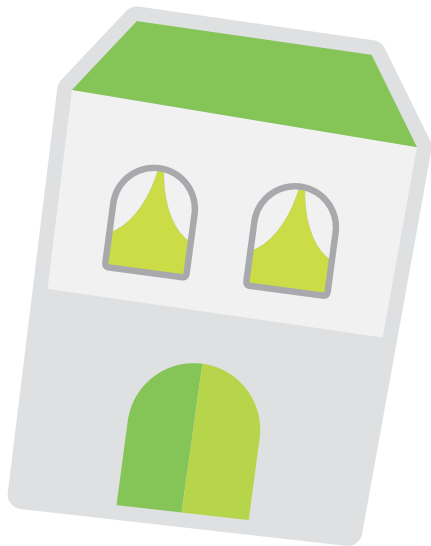
To Be Explicit…

A CMS is used to enable non-technical personnel to update/add to a website via a password protected private back-office area.

Updates and additions, including uploading of new text, photos and files, etc... are actioned using forms similar to those often seen on website enquiry pages ... where one types into a text field and then clicks a submit button.

CMS is the user-friendly (non-technical) way of managing an online database. The database is used to store data which is then dynamically presented on pages within a website.

CMS can be site-wide or implemented just for certain areas of a website (i.e. only those areas that need to be updated regularly).

And this is all done by the use of a Content Management System.

What do I need?

We could talk for days about all of the different content management solutions available, alongwith their merits and demerits... "free" (meaning open-sourced) or paid platforms, tailored or custom builds and off-the-shelf, one-size-fits-all solutions... There are many factors that govern the decision, including, (but not exclusive to) :

• The cost

• The technical proficiency of the team and the administrator – meaning the amount of control they need over the content and the feature set of the website

• Requirements of the website owner, e.g. ecommerce, the number of user-types, accounts and permissions, layout and design, etc...

• Search Engine Optimisation (SEO)

• Time-factors, etc...

• The long-term development of the platform, including the size of the open-sourced community or the company behind the paid solution

• The modularity/extensibility – meaning whether you can build out features on top of the core codebase.

Your Options

Functionality varies from CMS to CMS, but many of the most popular websites in the world use free and publicly available CMS' like Wordpress, Joomla and Drupal.

Off-the-Shelf

The cheapest solution is an off-the-shelf package. This provides basic functionality in a one-size-fits all manner, and usually allows a user to change the colour scheme and some elements of the design. On a budget, this may seem like a reasonable solution for a prudent business person, but off-the-shelf packages are lacking in many crucial areas, particularly in terms of SEO - which is how a developer or designer improves the website's ability to be found in search engines – and in extensibility. As your business grows, you want your website to grow with it, and off-the-shelf packages are severely limited in terms of how much you can build outside of the core structure.

Open-Sourced Platforms

In software, there is an unwritten rule: Never build from scratch. Sometimes it is absolutely necessary, but this is usually because businesses and development teams haven't sat down to map out the future development of the website, and eventually new information comes in or the business grows to the point where the original core structure isn't suitable for what often seems an innocuous, but crucial, piece of functionality.

The most famous and commonly used open-sourced solutions are Wordpress, Joomla and Drupal. These are highly stable, scalable and robust platforms, with large developer communities that support and grow them. But to a lesser extent, they also suffer on both an SEO and extensibility level. For example, it is a much bigger challenge to build in multiple user-types into a Wordpress, so even if this is not in the specification at the beginning, it is important to map out a road map so as to know whether this platform is suitable or not. Even though these solutions may be cheaper upfront, if a website is not future-proofed from the beginning, a forced re-build is the most expensive utcome in the end. Alas, this is a common outcome...
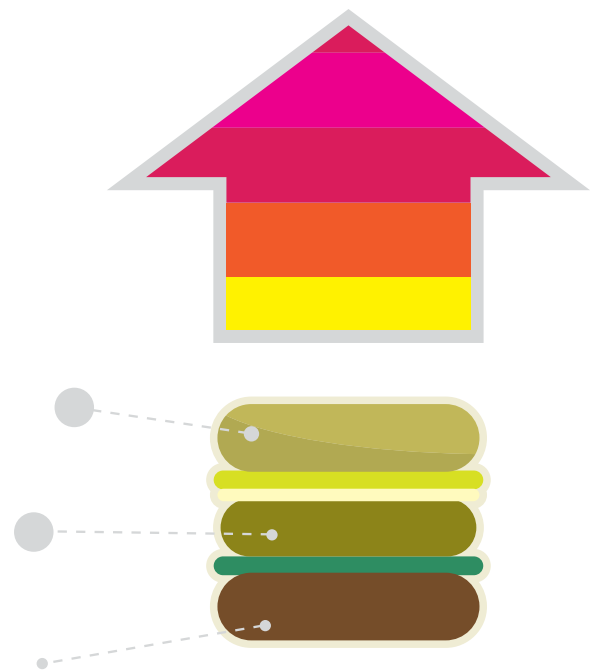
Tailored or Custom Solution

At Enhance, for most businesses we recommend a custom CMS, which is built on a robust, yet malleable open-sourced web framework. We build ours on Code Igniter, which is the most popular PHP framework. This allows much greater control over the structural SEO and is built in a modular fashion so most functionality can be bolted on the web, the website and the business develops. We use common technologies so that any professional developer can easily modify or develop the application further.

Other robust and extensible frameworks supported by large developer communities include Ruby on Rails and Groovy on Grails.

Brass Tacks

Purely in terms of up-front cost, the off-the-shelf solution is the cheapest... but it is very important that the long-term ambitions of the website are accounted for before taking this option.

The open-sourced platforms and the custom build are similar in terms of up-front costs and for many businesses this is an appropriate option.

But our 16 years of industry expertise, building lasting relationships with clients and witnessing their own development, as they learn more about what the web can do for them, has taught us to recommend a custom build on a recognised framework like Code Igniter.

To use a common expression in web development, what costs you a day today, will cost you a week down the line.

For a CMS demonstration, contact us at info@enhancewebdesign.ie