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Choosing a CMS (Content Management System)

By Rob Sullivan

up until recently very few systems were considered search engine friendly.

The foundation of most CMS systems is simple: First one creates a template which will be used to display your pages. In general, one template is all that is needed for an entire site. From there one uses the provided software to add content to the site. This usually means entering the content in some form of dashboard. When completed the data is written into a database. When a site visitor requests a page, it is usually created "on the fly" by pulling the appropriate data from the database and displaying it in the template.

With that description of a CMS system in mind, one must consider what the CMS can do for them. Therefore some questions needs to be answered by the CMS provider:

Questions To Ask:

How search engine friendly is the CMS system?

There are a few CMS which are designed with search engines in mind. By search engine friendly one must know if it support unique meta tags for each page and are these tags easily modified? Can the CMS display static pages or does it require session variables and other dynamic variables to work properly? Can one apply a customizable file structure to the system or is it set to a default? In other words, can the system organize files in the top 2 or 3 folders, or does it bury content in some long obscure path like:

www.somesite.com/folder1/folder2/folder3/yet-another-folder/why-not-one-more-folder/filename.htm ?

If the answer no to any of the above questions is "no", then other options should be considered.

Here is why:

Search engines consider the folder depth when assigning values such as link popularity and inheritance. And while you can minimize link popularity loss through effective navigation, ultimately the

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folder depth will impact your performance.

This goes back to the "old days" of the web, when many sites were hand coded and file and folder structure were managed by the webmaster.

Generally, less important content, or content which changed infrequently, was placed deeper in the site. Search engines soon figured this out, so appropriately assigned value to those pages. As such they continue to use this logic today when assigning values to pages.

Does the system support unique meta tags?

A site need unique meta tags because pages perform better on search engines if they are all unique -

that not only means unique text content but unique meta tags that match the text content. The CMS should also have the ability to easily go in and modify the meta tags and content to help improve search engine rankings, and ultimately traffic (and hopefully sales).

Does the system support static pages?

One wants the pages to appear static to the search engines and be able to display without any types of session variable, or other identifiers needed to help build the pages. For example, the page called:

`www.somesite.com/page.htm&sessionid=1&page=3&content=4`

will not perform as well as a page called

`www.somesite.com/content4/page3.htm`

Not only will search engine spiders tend to leave a site when they see "seesionid" (because session ids tend to catch them in a never ending loop on the site) but the static pages tend to perform better in search results than dynamic pages. Even more so in highly or even moderately competitive search markets.

How flexible is the folder structure?

One should have the ability to organize the files the way they see fit. Ideally, it would be best if all the pages could reside in the root folder, or at the very least one should have the ability to organize them in subfolders off the root. It is generally accepted that all the site's pages be no more than 3 folders deep. This is because the deeper the pages reside, the lower their relevancy is considered to be by the search engines.

What platform does the CMS need to run on?

Some CMS are built to run on a Linux or UNIX server while others are designed for a Microsoft IIS platform. Therefore the decision one makes on the CMS depends on what hosting has already been

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arranged (if any). If hosting hasn't already been arranged, then there is more flexibility in the choice of system

What kind of customer service does the CMS company offer?

In other words, can the CMS provider build custom modules, or is the system limited to only what they sell? In many cases people will think they had purchased the perfect CMS only to find later that they needed features which were not available to them. In these cases, one may have to hire an independent programmer to build the custom application, which can get expensive.

As one can see, there should be many more questions asked when considering any kind of content management system. From the point of view of the search engine, these questions need to be answered first before getting into things like platforms, customer service and so on. After all, what is the point of building this great looking; customer friendly website which is packed full of useful content only to find out that it is virtually invisible to the rest of the web?

Rob Sullivan – SEO Specialist and Internet Marketing Consultant. Any reproduction of this article needs

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Choosing A Web Site Content Management System

By Michael Park

As the saying goes on the web "Content is King." There is no argument that if you are going to have an effective Internet presence you must have current, dynamic content that gives your visitors reasons to come back time and again. While content may be king there seems to be little discussion about the optimal way to manage this content for small to medium sized businesses. Have you ever noticed that when your building the web site you have plenty of helping hands but once the site is launched and the daily grind of support kicks in it becomes harder and harder to find that help. This is why it is so important to evaluate your Content Management System (CMS) for you web site in the development stages. Every web site has some form of content management system in place, except for those that never change. The CMS can be as informal as an email to the web developer or a multi-million dollar computer program that warehouses data from several different databases. In focusing on small to medium sized businesses I have decided to eliminate the big dollar systems and concentrate on the three major types of CMS's available.

The first type of CMS is the default traditional and most widely used method I call the manual update system. This usually requires sending the information to the web developer. The web developer then utilizes their FTP program and HTML coding skills to make the requested changes. The changes are then reviewed and approved by the requester. The problem with this

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model is that the web developer is usually a high priced contractor and not an in-house resource. This means that you end paying a hefty price for web site changes. The cost of web site changes becomes a budget issue so you end up reducing the number of changes you make to your site in turn reducing its overall value.

The second type of CMS is the WYSIWYG system. This model allows the web site owner to use one of the graphical web development tools on the market today such as FrontPage or Net Objects Fusion. These are great programs that allow you to make changes to the web site in a graphical look. The changes are simple and if you configure the software correctly you can update your web site with a few clicks of the mouse. The problem with this model is that you become dependent on the WYSIWYG tool. If you can't get to FrontPage then you can't make your change unless you resort back to our first model. But now it gets a little trickier. These WYSIWYG tools create very convoluted HTML code so manual changes can become very time consuming. Another draw-back of the model is that if your company utilizes a tool like this to create their site they may limit themselves to the graphical templates that come with the software. You end up getting a site that looks pretty much like everybody else's. Furthermore, I think it is important for any company planning on building or revamping their web site to meet with a web development company to at least review the best practices for web development.

The final type of CMS is what I like to refer to as an integrated CMS. This type of Content Management Systems is built directly into the site during development. In order to make changes the web owner simply enters in a secure URL, logins and makes changes to the site without having to know any HTML or FTP commands. Changes are instant and all the user

needs is a web browser and access to the Internet. This has been a very successful model for our company because it allows us to build web sites that empower the web owners. Web owners can make changes to their sites as often as they like without the need for a high priced web developer. Of course the cost of a site with an integrated CMS will be a little higher but the overall cost of ownership of the site will be dramatically reduced over time.

Regardless of the model they choose, web site owners must acknowledge that their web site does come with a Content Management System installed. An educated web site owner will ensure that their site has a CMS that allows them to get the most out their web site.

Michael Park, MBA MCP Chief Technical Officer 4net Software, Inc. Internet Development Solutions
<http://www.4netsoftware.com> mpark@4netsoftware.com



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