

10 tips ensure intelligent CMS purchases

By BRIAN FELDMAN

Dynamic and topical Web sites have rapidly become a staple of sophisticated marketing initiatives. Just as quickly, a number of Web content management system (CMS) products have promised to deliver the flexibility needed to manage Web site life cycles. CMS products can cost as little as a few hundred or as much as several hundred thousand dollars. Price tag alone is not the entire picture, however, and anyone who attempts to equate cost with capabilities can quickly come to wrong conclusions. I offer here 10 tips to help you make intelligent CMS purchasing decisions by setting up apples-to-apples criteria of how to compare one CMS product to another.

1. Get a detailed understanding of how flexible the CMS product is. What will the CMS let you change once the initial Web site design is completed? Consider that a system that allows you only to post updated press releases is called a CMS, as is a system that allows you to alter every inch of every page of your site. For starters, determine if you can add new content to each and every type of content block that the site has, and if not, which ones are excluded. Then look at whether you can change the order of content, including changing the order of pages. Determine if you can add new pages and if there are limitations to how many or where on the site these pages can be added.

Price tags do not correlate 100% with most or least flexible CMS options. If you think you need a top-of-the-line full-featured system, look at midpriced options as well as the most expensive. Or, if you fear that your limited budget will keep you in the low-priced CMS category, but you need more flexibility than these options appear to afford, see if a high-quality midpriced offering has pricing options or variations that can bring it in line with your budget.

2. Determine the technical proficiency required to operate the system. Some CMS products are so complex that the marketing depart-

ments remain heavily reliant on IT experts to make them work. Get a demo of every CMS option you are considering and see if you can learn how to update content during the course of the demo. If not, walk away. The best CMS products will be extremely intuitive to operate. Significant IT involvement should end shortly after the product is selected and installed.

3. Ensure there are no requirements for additional programming. Closely related to the issue of needed IT expertise to operate the system is the question of how much you have to do to the system to get the full functionality you require. You cannot ask too many questions in the quest to clarify with the CMS vendor what functionality comes out-of-the-box, so to speak, and what requires additional services and expense.

4. Look for straightforward pricing. Walk away from any CMS product that has complicated pricing schemes that are difficult to understand. You should be able to ask for and receive one comprehensive price tag, or else buyer beware: Expect hidden costs that you have not anticipated.

5. Consider implementation time. Many marketing executives have signed on to Web initiatives using what are called “framework products,” not realizing that it would take them more than a year to get the system up and running. These products not only incur six-figure costs but also leave users lagging behind competitors with more flexible Web site management techniques. Full-featured CMS systems exist that allow marketers to begin updating content within hours and deploy entire Web sites in weeks—not months, and certainly not years.

6. Clarify inherent system limits on numbers of content contributors. Don't think the number of content contributors you've identified so far will suffice for the duration of the Web site life cycle. Rather, make sure you know the limits of a given CMS in terms of content contributors and figure

that you may need to expand in the future. The best CMS option will allow unlimited numbers of content contributors.

7. Look for methods to protect design integrity. The best CMS option will allow designers to create a Web design that is effectively bullet-proof to the content changes you anticipate will occur during the Web site life cycle. You need to ensure that these safeguards are available and easily understood by the Web designer you enlist to create your Web site.

8. Insist on built-in methods to approve content. At minimum, any CMS choice is designed to ensure that the site's integrity is preserved and that your CMS automation allows for an orderly approval flow. Some systems to protect structure approvals are better than others, and you should determine how this is done ahead of time and be sure it will work in your organization.

9. Look for standard technology. Any automation that uses readily available technology will be an advantage to your organization by making it easier to mesh with the infrastructure already in use. Bring your IT people in at the beginning to help determine if the CMS is based on idiosyncratic home-grown code that might be challenging to weave into existing computer infrastructures.

10. Plan for multi-site capabilities. Although your interest in CMS automation might stem from a particular marketing initiative that you want to build into your company's public site now, you should anticipate that your future needs might involve many related sites with distinct URLs. The best CMS options will allow you to efficiently update information on all related sites—company site, marketing-driven sites, intranet and extranets—simultaneously. ■

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