Which elements to look at when choosing a CMS website platform

Content-managed website platforms have dramatically lowered the barrier to entry for companies who wish to develop and maintain a website on a limited marketing budget.

If planned correctly, these websites are huge time and energy savers that put you in the driver’s seat of maintaining your website, and empower you with tools you need to keep the fresh content coming.

If poorly planned though, these sites can go very wrong, very quickly, and you can land up with an unmanageable, complicated mess that requires advanced platform and coding knowledge to effectively maintain.

So just what are the key elements that you should look at when deciding which platform you’re going to choose?

# 10,000 hours

If you’re having your site built by an external agency, then the single largest consideration has to be the platform that they are most knowledgeable in.

On average, it’s said that it takes 10,000 hours of practice and application to achieve mastery in a field, and by this reasoning it makes a lot of sense that an agency will pick a direction and stick with it, because every subsequent site built will benefit from the knowledge and experience of sites built before.

## What you have to be concerned about here though, is training and support.

Not everyone who is good at what they do is good at imparting that knowledge to others, and if your agency cannot teach you how to use your site easily, then how are you going to manage it yourself afterwards?

Another key factor is support: does the agency you’ve chosen offer support, and will they be open to taking a call from you when you need assistance with the site they’ve built?

Chances are really good that, in the beginning anyway, you are going to make some errors that may look catastrophic and can even make your whole site disappear. When this happens you’re going to need some sort of reliable back up and a place you can turn to for help.

# The System Interface

All things being equal, not all CMS systems are as easy to use and understand as their counterparts. In fact, some of the back-ends can be downright scary to try and navigate your way around – even for experienced developers.

Again, what you’re looking for here is the knowledge and support of the agency that originally built the site for you, as well as the free availability of tutorials and guides.

Take the time to let the agency you’ve engaged show you what the back end interface looks like, and see how quickly the interface makes sense to you.

Remember, CMS platforms are designed to simplify the process of creating a website, in order to make it manageable by non-developers.

This means that you should be able to get the basic lay of the land pretty quickly, and by looking at the multiple interfaces that are available, you’ll quickly determine which one is most suited to your level knowledge, and will be the easiest for you to use.

# Development Language and Developers

From asp.net to pHp, HTML and more, there are a myriad of development languages out there that can do similar things, and offer similar functionalities for website and web-based platform development.

In order to get the best kind of functionality out of your site, you ideally want to be playing in the developer’s preferred language. But what exactly happens if your developer gets run over by a bus? Do you have somewhere else you can turn to?

Like normal spoken languages, each development language has its own syntax, structure and vocabulary, and being a developer does not necessarily mean that you are able to ‘converse’ fluently in all the available languages.

So, chances are good that if you choose one of the more obscure CMS platforms, you’ll land up tied to the developer who constructed your site, purely because of a lack of availability of developers who speak that particular language, or who understand that specific interface.

This will impact you in two big ways: first you lose your competitive pricing edge because you have a limited amount of suppliers you can actually approach. Secondly, it ties you to the creative capacity of one studio – and just what happens if their work is not up to scratch?

# Template & Extension Costs

Starting at free and then catapulting all the way into the stratosphere of the sublime and the ridiculous, there is no limit to what template, component and plugin providers around the world can charge for their offerings. What largely keeps them in line is marketplace competition.

For the larger platforms like Joomla and Wordpress, there is a wide availability of template and component providers, and for pretty much anything you want, there’s a version that’s free.

On the flipside, a custom-built CMS platform means that you are tied to the developer who built your site, and to the extent of his development knowledge for the kind of functionality and experience you’d like your users to have.

What’s more, you are also likely to be limited to a single component to perform the functionality you’re after – and just what happens if you don’t like the look of the extension, or how it integrates into your site?

Finally, there’s cost – and remember most of the templates and extensions are sold in the global marketplace, which means they’re priced in US Dollars.

The cost of extensions and templates is an enormous factor when you’re looking at your platform choice, largely because it’s going to be one of the few ongoing costs you should have with your website.

You never know how your business is going to develop, or what opportunities will arise for you, and you’ll cry big crocodile tears when a simple video plugin to get your awesome new TV ad posted on your site lands up costing you half of what it cost to develop the site in the first place.

All jokes aside, I saw a simple form component (EVERY website needs forms) for a more obscure platform priced at US $450 the other day. The Joomla equivalent is about ZAR200.

There are so many options out there nowadays, and so many players in the field that it’s really easy to get taken in by low prices and just write that off to a competitive market.

When it comes to planning a CMS website though, an ounce of foresight and research can save you a lot of money and time down the road. And at the end of the day, what your site should be, above all else, is friendly, cost-effective, easy to manage and simple for you to use.

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**A note to the editor:**

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