
As many companies are learning, productive communication on the Web does not happen by accident; it is an outgrowth of consistent content management. It's also a multifaceted challenge. Trying to solve it with technology alone is like broadcasting the wrong score from a stadium's public address system rather than the cheerleader's megaphone. Even though the message is much louder, it's not necessarily better. A management framework that addresses *all* aspects of Web content management includes:

- A **business model** that defines Internet, intranet or extranet objectives, audience and measurements

- A **content model** that prioritizes and places content—both internal and external—based on user requirements
- A **management model** that establishes consistent processes, roles and responsibilities
- A **technology model** that offers savings through standardized tools and platforms

Take a moment to reflect on your Internet presence. What does your Web site say about you as a company? Can your customers find what they want quickly and easily? Are your customers actually hearing what you'd like them to hear?



To whom are you speaking?

You probably recall the perceptive observation from the Cheshire Cat in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*: "If you don't know where you are going, then it doesn't matter which road you take, does it?" If current corporate Web sites are any indication, many organizations are practicing a similar mantra: "When you're not certain who you are addressing, almost any message will do." They would confess to publishing everything they have—but not necessarily what their customers need. As you review your Web site, ask yourself these questions:

- Who is the target audience?
- What are their characteristics?
- What types of services and information could improve *their* business performance?
- How can you help make *them* more successful?

Bear in mind there will be more than one audience. To speak effectively to each one, you may have to abandon the "one-Web-size-fits-all" approach and concentrate instead on the needs and priorities of each target group—consumers, business partners or your own sales force.

As with any customer-related activity, successful Web content management begins and ends with the customer. A content management framework keeps the focus where it needs to be—clearly articulating the audience for each Web initiative and the business capabilities required to meet the objectives for that target group. Customer priorities guide content selection, as well as placement and presentation approach. A solid content management strategy ensures that operational metrics focus on customer reaction—the key measure of your success.

Define the ears—and the eyes and minds—you're trying to reach. Then, build and deliver what they truly value.



That's not what I *meant* to say

Information showcased on your home page is akin to storefront window displays—inviting each passerby inside for a closer look. These physical windows are continuously adjusted and refreshed to maintain the proper image—trend-setter, innovator or trustworthy advisor. But too often, organizations allow their electronic window dressings to grow stale. Charter members of the ad hoc coalition that designed the company's initial Web sites return to their normal, everyday responsibilities and leave no one behind to mind the store.

Unlike catalogs and price sheets that customers toss out when the expiration date passes, out-of-date Internet content never goes away on its own. Consumers continue to research, compare and even purchase based on old, inaccurate information. Without proper controls over Internet content, organizations subject themselves to angry customers, “bait and switch” accusations—or worse. One music fan—who happens to be a

Chicago attorney—ignited an international incident over a European company's refusal to sell him a CD at the (incorrect) price listed on their Web site. After much banter among lawyers and the media, the company mailed him the CD—free of charge.

Incorrect handling of time-sensitive data—whether your own or information entrusted to you by others—can be devastating. Imagine the frustration of potential customers who have seen or heard advertisements for your new product, only to find they can't order it from your Web site. Or think about the potential legal exposures caused by pre-releasing quarterly business results or prematurely announcing a new corporate alliance.

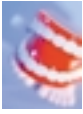
With so much information imported from external sources, and the ease of Internet publication within most companies today, it's not surprising that executives are often uncertain about what is actually available on their corporate Web site. More than a few companies have been caught off guard by copyright infringements, exposed confidential information, sexually explicit material, ethnic slurs or privacy violations. Online publishing has revealed a legal minefield:

- **Electronic rights**—Six publishers were sued by freelance writers over disputed rights to publish printed materials on the Internet.
- **Copyright issues**—In at least one high-profile case, *intent* was not required for the court to find copyright infringement.
- **Questionable hypertext links**—Well-known enterprises are battling—in and out of the courtroom—over the legality of “linking deeply” into another company’s Internet site.
- **Technology patents**—A lawsuit filed against four large U.S. newspaper groups asserts unauthorized use of online mapping technology to help their Web site users locate restaurants and other businesses.

Out-of-control publishing can lead to serious consequences—high-dollar legal disputes, public relations fiascos and irreparable damage to your brand.

A content management framework can be the “conscience” that protects your corporate reputation by articulating to all potential messengers what you intend to say, designing how you will say it, ensuring you say it correctly and then delivering the message reliably—every time.

Dull, inaccurate or inappropriate content can obscure or negate the real message that you want to leave with online visitors. Know what your Web site is saying.



Everyone's talking at once—and saying different things

Imagine yourself seated in a crowded restaurant trying to engage in a lively discussion with seven of your closest friends. You find yourself shouting, waving your arms or even resorting to hand signals to communicate with those around your table. Now envision how Web site visitors may react to a fragmented Internet presence:

- Complete product descriptions offered for one product line; sketchy abstracts and missing prices on others
- Ordering instructions on one page; contradictory details on the next
- Ten different ways to say “one hundred percent cotton”
- Accepting personal information from Internet users based on your published privacy policy—only to have a back-office system, twice removed, violate your public privacy stance
- Five different sets of contact information— one for each U.S. geographic region and no apparent alternatives for the rest of the world

Also, remember that your customers interact with you in multiple ways. They don't want to read one thing on the Internet and hear the opposite when they call your support center. Lack of integration across different channels can make your organization appear disjointed, and incapable of meeting reasonable customer expectations. To be effective, your content management purview must encompass more than your Web site.

Unifying your Web presence through a single, consistent content management framework can help you:

- Avoid overlap and redundancy among Web initiatives
- Encourage the development of consistent, easy-to-use interfaces based on the needs of your target audience
- Avoid duplication through defined e-business management roles and shared processes
- Eliminate the expense of maintaining multiple technology platforms and tool sets

Haphazard presentation of Web content and incongruent online behavior is, at best, perplexing; at worst, it is aggravating to your customers. Speak with one voice.



Stop rambling—and get to the point

Think about a recent conversation with a chatty acquaintance. You know the one—the person who always manages to turn a five-minute phone call into a half-hour discussion. You politely interject a comment here and there, all the while trying to decipher what prompted the call in the first place.

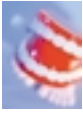
Web sites without explicit business objectives suffer from a similar flaw. Lack of clarity in purpose encourages an unbridled proliferation of content. Clutter and complexity soon abound. Customers become bored or frustrated, and often give up before they discover the “good stuff.” These sites are typically full of re-purposed materials that were never intended for a medium like the Internet—long, involved narratives rather than short, easy-to-scan points; areas that are light on visuals and heavy on words; and content that is primarily “pushed” with little or no interaction.

Irrelevant or duplicated information can be costly. Beyond the administration costs, the potential for lost sales and customer disinterest hits even harder. In fact, some companies have found that

simply reducing and streamlining content—without any other outside promotion or incentives—has resulted in increased Web usage and revenue. Unfocused content spells inefficiency—an unaffordable position for any company that’s serious about using the Web as a place of business.

A strong content management framework includes unambiguous business objectives that promote smart content development and acquisition decisions, and serve as a barometer for gauging Web site effectiveness. With a definite direction in mind, businesses can establish milestones and measure attainment of specific goals.

On the Internet, losing a customer’s interest is tantamount to losing that customer. Construct sound business objectives for your Web site and align everything else with them. Succinctly express the precise message that you’ve planned for your customers.



Are you listening...and learning?

Remember that by definition, conversations are not one-way. Corporations can get so immersed in broadcasting their messages to the marketplace that they fail to listen for those faint whispers that come back: “What I *really* want is...,” “How can I...?” or “You want me to do *what?*”

Does your Web site offer explicit ways for customers to voice their opinions? Do you measure and act on that wealth of information, or does it accumulate somewhere in a seldom-accessed database? Unsolicited customer critiques can provide valuable insights that lead to product innovation or process improvement. Sometimes, an organization’s most vulnerable blind spots are in full view of their customers. Consider your customer feedback a priceless resource: mine it; don’t bury it.

It’s possible that your customers’ Web actions are speaking louder than their words. Are you “listening” for those non-verbal messages as well? Some clues will be obvious—traffic generated, most frequent entrance and exit spots, average order value or number of repeat visits. Others may be more obtuse—like correlated buying patterns, failed search words or abandoned online shopping

carts. To be successful as an e-business, you must enforce operational metrics driven by Web-relevant measures tailored to the specific behaviors that your enterprise wants to encourage. With an integrated content management system, you can design appropriate measurements predicated upon an initiative’s objectives and audience.

Learn from everything you “hear.” Use what you learn to anticipate customer needs. If a buyer routinely purchases a thousand pounds of clay from you each month, would you send him a reminder when he “forgets” to order? Would you even notice? Have you earned enough trust to be permitted to place the missing orders for him?

Positive customer dialogue engenders loyalty. Customers who feel ignored won’t be customers for long. Establish a content management system equipped with powerful hearing aids that can help you become a good listener.



What are you really communicating?

Your digital persona is an integral component of your brand image. Is your Web presence saying what it should about you? Is your site an electronic embodiment of your overall business objectives?

Take a moment to assess the effectiveness of your company's online communication skills:

- Do you know specifically which groups you are trying to reach with your Web site?
- Do you find visitors never returning?
- Are you delivering the information and services that your customers deem most important?
- Is your online content organized along internal business boundaries, or structured for intuitive use by your external audience?
- Is your content built flexibly to allow you to adjust and adapt as your business environment changes?
- Do you have specific policies in place to minimize legal exposures?
- Do you have a clearly defined privacy policy, available for viewing by your visitors?
- Have your content management processes kept up with the rapid growth of your Web site?
- Have you standardized content management processes and technology platforms to obtain synergistic savings?
- What measurements do you have in place to gauge the effectiveness of your Internet-supplied information and services?
- Are you spending more on content management "tools" than you are on developing business objectives, management processes and the content itself?

Technology is only one small facet of a thriving Internet presence. To succeed as an e-business, companies must accurately ascertain customer needs and establish the necessary management systems to define, create, manage and measure the corresponding Web content. You can increase the odds that your online customers can actually hear you by implementing a content management system that works.

As a leading e-business, IBM has learned many of these lessons first hand. We're ready to help you clear the airwaves and establish a strong connection with your own customers. Contact us at envision@us.ibm.com to find out how to build a strong content management approach for your e-business. If you'd like to learn more about our Centers for IBM e-business Innovation or explore other resources for business executives, visit our Web site at ibm.com/services/innovation.

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