

Content Publishing Strategies: Creating Usability While Building the System Architecture

By Rena Tom

What do Information Architects and Content Publishing Managers have in common? Probably more than you think. Both strive to structure content so that users can accomplish their tasks quickly and easily. The only difference is that an Information Architect generally focuses on satisfying the site's visitors, while the Publishing Manager is trying to make the production team's life a little easier. A Web content management system -- its architecture, authoring, management and deployment strategies -- really serves both communities of users and should be designed accordingly.

In her book, *Designing Easy-to-Use Websites*, Vanessa Donnelly reiterates this, stating that the two main usability goals should be the development of an easy-to-use site that presents quality content and the system to create and manage that content. An information architect must work with the Publishing Manager to think about how content should be used and reused, and to collaborate on site framework requirements: site and directory structure; the information hierarchy; page templating; metadata and page output. Developing a scalable and accessible content infrastructure can lead to greater site usability, which leads to higher user satisfaction.

The technology is finally available so that wedding these two seemingly disparate areas is not so daunting. For example, content management tools can assist with the implementation of "bottom-up architecture," or organizing content at the most granular level, discussed by Louis Rosenfeld back in 1998¹. At the time, content management systems were in their infancy, and XML content conversion and "chunking" was a largely manual task, making conversion of existing content a costly and painful undertaking. Now, three years later, the bottom-up approach is still a hot topic² and far easier to implement due to the advancement of content management and conversion technologies.

Another problem with supporting a Web site is that the larger it becomes, the greater is the potential for it to be awkward and unwieldy. The integrity that a site may have had when it was brand new and tightly controlled by a few team members is easily breached as deadlines loom, corners are cut and more people contribute code and content. This is visible to a site visitor when she discovers links that are broken, content that is out-of-date, pages that look and act differently and search engines that don't return good results. Managing the display and organization of current, relevant content goes a long way toward looking professional, authoritative and trustworthy.

Besides solving production bottlenecks and problems with overwritten content -- both features traditionally thought of as "content management" -- a Web content management system can help present a cohesive user experience and can maintain brand integrity. Here are some examples of how this is accomplished.

Information architecture goal	Front-end requirement	Back-end solution
Promote User's Trust in Web site	Look and feel are consistent across site	TEMPLATING: Enforce design standards, provide restricted access to non-technical users
	Site always shows current information	LIBRARY SERVICES: Version and display new content, expire, remove and archive old content, track broken links
	Site is seen as a single integrated application	REPOSITORY: Integrate code, content and images for easy access and reuse
Keep Users Coming Back to Web site	Content is created by experts	AUTHORING: Non-technical business users create and enter content easily
	Content is high quality, edited material	WORKFLOW: Pass content through review and approval cycles
	Site loads quickly and is always available	DEPLOYMENT: Cache popular pages, deploy content to distributed servers
Help User Find What He Wants	Pages are readable, printable and portable	XML: Adjust layout per user's needs or output device
	Content is available in multiple languages	MULTIPLE DEVELOPMENT ENVIRONMENTS: Manage the content translation process, manage alternate graphics and templates
	Navigation (hierarchical, contextual, search-based) is accurate and up-to-date	METADATA: Auto-index content, tag content for reuse, provide consistent search parameters and results
	Content is specific to the user	PERSONALIZATION: Publish content dynamically, provide different views for different users

Originally published in 2001 at webcms.org

¹ Rosenfeld, Louis (1998, August 14). "Bottom-Up Architecture". WebReview.com. Retrieved from http://www.webreview.com/1998/08_14/designers/08_14_98_2.shtml

² Merholz, Peter (2001, February 27). "ASIS&T 2001 Summit -- Trends". peterme.com. Retrieved from http://www.peterme.com/asis/2001summit_trends.html