

# MAKING SURE CONTENT REMAINS KING



**MANAGING THE INFORMATION ON YOUR WEBSITE CAN BE A MAKE OR BREAK ENDEAVOUR. CONTENT IS KING BUT, IN ORDER TO RULE, IT HAS TO HAVE A DECENT THRONE TO SIT ON, AS DAVID MAIDA DISCOVERS.**

Gone are the days, thankfully, where static websites were the norm. You know the ones. They never changed, from one month to the next. Content was simply uploaded and then forgotten about.

Successful websites have dynamic content with fresh, constantly updated material. Users demand it. So, when your own server starts putting up last month's sales, yesterday's news and staff appointments for people who've left the company – alarm bells should start ringing.

But just how do you manage all that material? How do you keep it fresh? And what do you do with the old stuff that just seems to keep logging up the system?

For Kylie Gibbon and the 30 Web editors at the Auckland Regional Council (ARC), managing the content requires constant vigilance and a lot of man-hours.

"One of our key challenges is managing the data because there is so much of it," said the online communications adviser. "And also the whole site architecture is a real challenge for us because there is simply so much information that we have to display. Just keeping on top of that, managing it, making sure things are timely and don't get out of date, and that sort of thing."

With 130,000 unique visits per month, the ARC website has the latest information on air and water quality, economic development,

resource consent, schools and even volcanoes. If something's not right, it's not a good look.

"It doesn't make us look very professional I guess if we've got out of date content on the site."

Managing online content has gone well beyond simply coding HTML pages and putting them up on the Net. There are a lot more options available now than there were just five or even two years ago – not least the emergence of content management systems (CMSs).

These are hot items. A growing number of companies are developing and/or selling CMS solutions – including Solutionists, Straker, WebDirector, and Digital Stream. Designed specifically to help manage website content, CMSs can not only organise content but also control which content is online and when. They can let users analyse content and track how it is being used. They can even help control the quality of the content by showing who reviewed and edited which pages and when.

Timing is everything for ARC. It's vital that old and outdated content is not served up to taxpaying citizens who are looking for the latest information.

"We can basically make things inactive and it stays inactive," said Gibbon. "And if perhaps somebody has got an older link for a page you'll get a message saying that this content is now out of date and

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it will refer you back to the home page, or it gives you an option to get in touch with the webmaster to request the copy if you need it.”

For the MetService, having updated content on its website is more than just creating a good experience for the user – it can be a serious safety issue. For that reason, humans have been all but taken out of the loop.

“Mostly it’s automated,” explained analyst programmer James Guthrie. “All the data comes out of our old systems and it just gets picked up by the website. There is a bit of static content that gets changed from time to time but I’d say 99 per cent of it is automatic.”

What could be better? A website – built in-house from scratch – which pretty much runs itself and always has the latest information. But can you trust it?

“We’ve always had systems which catch out-of-date data because, particularly with forecast information, it’s not good if you have old stuff there. So we’ve always built systems that are self-aware of data not being in the right place at the right time and that just gets switched off if it’s not there. It’s pretty robust sort of stuff. We’ve done quite a lot to put serious systems in place. It’s all peer-reviewed. Everything gets checked to the nth degree.”

Whether it’s an off-the-shelf CMS, an open-source solution, or a system your techies have built in-house, the tools used to manage content can make life a whole lot easier – provided everything is set up properly.

Mauricio Freitas runs a technology news website, Geekzone ([www.geekzone.co.nz](http://www.geekzone.co.nz)). In order to put news, product reviews and blogs on the Net, he bought just such a solution. But he then had to modify it to add a few functions and features that he wanted.

“We have the options to determine start dates for the articles,” Freitas said. “What happens sometimes is like when I go and travel; I might write a review or two and a couple of articles and time the releases so that something goes live tomorrow, something goes live a couple of days after and in another two days something else goes live. So I can actually manage when things go live on the site.”

Pre-loading content offline which will then go live at a predetermined time is a common feature of new CMSs.

“If I receive a press release with an embargo date, I can write about it and put it in the database and just specify what date and time things go live. Sometimes it happens that I have things go live at 3am. It’s not because I’m in front of the computer at 3am. I’ve prepared the thing beforehand.”

So, a good CMS can make you look like a content production dynamo putting up new pages 24/7!

Whatever way you choose, websites need to start off on the right foot. The way content is structured and organised on the server is just as important as the content itself.

Gibbon believes that content management must work hand in hand with usability because “there’s no point in having fresh content if nobody can find it”.

“There’s so much information that we have to display. Even when the site was launched in 2002 there were still basic navigation issues about how you make it easy for people to find information and get to what they’re looking for quickly and simply and easily. It’s a real usability issue as well.”

Freitas agrees, adding that a wrong configuration of the database, like not enough memory available for the database, or not enough caching can cause big problems.

“When you have a high volume of content and a high volume of visitors to the site, I think that the most important thing is to make sure the content is readily available to users. If a page takes more than 10 seconds to load, on a fast connection, people will not go there again – or even bother to finish loading the page.

“That impacts the user’s experience. They will not come back if they don’t have a good experience.”

With all that content you might think that storage would be a problem, but with the price of server space falling, it was not an issue for anyone I spoke with.

“So far it hasn’t become a storage issue but we’re looking at it because obviously since 2002 we’ve been storing all this stuff and we are starting to get up there and we need to start looking at how we do that,” said Gibbon.

Whether it’s off-the-shelf, an open-source solution or developed in-house, your CMS should be rigorously tested by the people who will be using it. And as with any system, expect to have a few growing pains.

“Anything has bugs in it and there’s no such thing as a perfect solution”, she added.

Of course, you don’t have to use a CMS to manage a website. If it’s just a matter of a few pages, it’s probably not worth the \$6,000 to \$30,000 price tag (plus the training involved). I easily look after a small website, for example. I just edit the HTML myself.

But businesses that rely on an effective online presence – and opt not to use a CMS – need to be sure it won’t grow into something they can’t easily manage.

Before opting for an off-the-shelf CMS, the ARC’s online content was put up manually and the process was getting out of hand.

“The volume of information was getting too large to manage. It was not a very efficient way of doing it. People would literally give a Word document to the technical people who would then have to mark it all up and it was just such a long, convoluted process. And it was just a resource issue really, at the end of the day.”

Whichever way you choose, one thing’s for sure: effective website management will help to keep all your content happily seated on its throne. ■

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