

How to choose the right solution for your business.

There are many thousands of different solutions and software experts providing content management systems (CMS), shopping cart and e-commerce software so it can be hard to know which one to choose. Below are some key concepts and advice which will help you ask the right questions to make sure you choose the solution which is most suitable for your business.

Which software - Is it right for me?

A website with a CMS or shopping cart is a software package and you should ask the following questions about them. All good software should have the look and the functionality separated so that no matter which you software you use, you should be able to make it look pretty much as you want.

What is the name of the software / the shopping cart?

If the provider won't tell you or if it is "our own", then walk away – that is the most important piece of advice you can get. After all, if the company goes out of business or you are not happy with the service you are getting, who can look after your website? We use Drupal and Ubercart – there are many people who work with these packages so if you're not happy, you can easily take it elsewhere.

Who uses it?

Have a look for online shops and other websites using the same software – is it popular? Can you see any limitations?

A reference of large scale Drupal websites can be seen here:

<http://www.infomagnet.com/content/high-profile-high-traffic-drupal-websites> And of course there are many other businesses, charities, individuals and organisations using Drupal on both a small and large scale.

Who provides support?

You will need support and training – who provides this? Open source vs. Proprietary.

There are two distinct models of software – "Open Source" and "Proprietary". See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open-source_software for a rather lengthy and geeky explanation. In short, you will be familiar with proprietary products like Microsoft Word: You buy the product, it has certain features, it comes with support..... every so often a new version comes out and you can upgrade it to get more features. Open source software is different. It is free and comes with no support – you pay an expert for support as you need it. The "source code" of the software is also free and that means that an expert can change it and make it do anything you want.

There are advantages and disadvantages to each model. We favour and work with Open Source software. It means that it can always be made to do whatever you want – and it has

the huge advantage that if you are not happy with the service we provide, you can take the source code in the knowledge that it can be developed by a competent programmer. For a small business it is very flexible and it means that we have to stay competitive to keep your business – there is no technology lock-in. This is the biggest error that uninformed purchasers make – buying a product which can only be supported by a specific company or a limited number of people.

What happens If.....?

The person / company who wrote the software disappears?

The server crashes / breaks?

I want the website to do something new....?

These are absolutely key questions and they are often overlooked by inexperienced buyers. You need the software you choose to be something that plenty of people know and use. You need to be sure that you have adequate hosting – one that provides good support for the kind of software you are running and that takes proper scheduled backups and makes these available to you. And finally you need to know what happens if you want to expand the functionality of the software – the worst case scenario (and it's one we see frequently) is that you have to scrap your site and start again. Much better is software who's makers understand that you will need to enhance it as your business grows.

How good is it for search engines?

Not only is Drupal extremely flexible, it is great for search engines and has many useful features that allow you to perform well in search and lets your marketers make the most of your website. After all, there's no point having a great website if nobody can find it or the goods and services you sell.

Who owns the software? Who owns the code and the design?

This is another pitfall for buyers. Find out what kind of license the software and database have and who owns them.

Drupal is licensed under the GNU General Public *License*, version 2. You own the design copyright and any code custom created to produce the design. All site code is made available to you at any time on request and, the code behind the Drupal CMS is in the public domain. Should you require a copy of a complete site installation and database, there is a small charge to prepare this for you as it takes about 1.5 hours to do so.

Make sure you have the answer to these questions. In particular when it comes to hosting – ask what backups are taken and be sure of what happens to data on your computer. You have legal obligations – particularly if you are carrying out ecommerce or storing user details.

Please feel happy to ask about any of the above – and if other developers have strong points, good questions to ask, useful ideas, or differing opinions, we'd like to hear about them – it will be useful for you too.