Website Consolidation or Proliferation – Confused?

There are good business reasons for consolidating or proliferating websites. While both business approaches are sound, the belief is that multiple sites are the root cause of website and content mismanagement and therefore consolidation is the only answer. This is not entirely true; this paper helps clear up this misconception.

Significantly, its solution for good web content management is a unified platform that places content contributors rightfully in the driving seat.

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What is *really* behind web content management?

One thing is for certain, the number and size of websites has grown with the popularity of the internet. It is not unusual today to find many sizeable businesses operating very large or multiple websites consisting of thousands of web pages. These are accessed by millions of visitors through the public internet as well as private intranets and extranets.

As blogs and other online means of social interaction become even more popular, the amount of unstructured content – free-format text – is doubling every 18 months, according to a prominent market research consultancy. The business community has also started to take a keen interest in all of this. It is not uncommon for companies to monitor key websites for customer or user feedback. Some are even setting up special blogging sites (or enabling their general-purpose websites for free-format input) to stimulate interaction about their company, products and services.

A case in point is online retailer Amazon.com, which invites customers to evaluate recently purchased products and type in an online review. Not only is this information vital to the retailer's marketing, the 'neutrality' of the feedback can make it particularly valuable to customers as well, and influence their purchasing decisions.

King content

Not surprisingly, companies are taking website management very seriously. After all, websites should be seen as a strategic means of communicating with company stakeholders: customers, partners, staff and investors. What's more, websites are a company's showcase and should appeal to visitors and hold their attention, much like consumers in a retail outlet.

A proficient web content management (WCM) system can deliver all of this. After all, a website's most valuable component is content. Consequently, web content needs to be up to date, free of errors and consistent – within a single website or across multiple websites. These are typical characteristics of 'well managed' content.

Website consolidation…

Conventional wisdom seems to dictate that less or smaller is easier, tidier, cheaper and better. That is why website consolidation is synonymous with reducing website costs and improving website control, efficiency and effectiveness. A single corporate website or core group of websites means less and more-manageable content. At the same time merging websites also means consolidating WCM platforms. This could lead to reduced IT and operational costs and provide better negotiating leverage with IT suppliers.

However, website consolidation is often part of a bigger picture involving business-process rationalisation. If there is no good reason to re-engineer the business, perhaps website consolidation may not be a good idea either. Trying to consolidate different websites and processes to a single platform could produce a complex solution, difficult and costly to implement and operate.

Another key question to consider is whether website consolidation on its own will result in better WCM and generate all the other benefits. These issues are dealt with later on in this paper.

What is happening in industry is also occurring at public-sector agencies and other not-for-profit institutions. They too have adopted an entrepreneurial attitude and operate as businesses. Image is also important to them, and they too strive to offer their 'customers' the best service at the lowest cost. That is why, in the context of this paper, the term 'company', 'enterprise' or 'business' will equally apply to these organisations.

In the UK for example, the Government announced plans to consolidate more than 551 government-run websites (out of a total of 951) down to 26. A better service through a 'single port of call' is behind this move.

…or website proliferation?

At the same time however, many companies also see the need for operating more than one website (sub-sites on the public internet, extranets and one or multiple intranets), and for good reason. Like consolidation, the decision to deploy multiple websites is part of a bigger business and organisational strategy.

Multiple websites are often seen by large (multinational) companies as a clever means of localising content, structure and presentation for different target audiences and cultures. Distinct and dedicated websites can be easily used, for instance, to present distinct branding and marketing messages. Separate websites – sometimes connected through a portal to retain some corporate identity – also improve site accessibility and navigation, and facilitate access to specific and relevant information.

However, proliferation also creates some confusion: it directly contradicts the conventional wisdom of consolidation and what is perceived as best business practice and necessary for good WCM.

Heart of the matter

Fortunately, WCM has less to do with the number of websites and amount of content, and more to do with consolidating to the right WCM platform with the proper management methodology and functionality. So the issue of website consolidation or proliferation is irrelevant in this context. This is just as well because one approach does not need to preclude the other. In fact, consolidation and proliferation can be pursued simultaneously depending on the business case (AEGON, a leading life insurance company active in the USA, UK and Netherlands, is an example).

The importance of the Web to business and its unique requirements and characteristics has given WCM an extra impetus and a special place, alongside the all-encompassing enterprise content management (ECM).

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WCM systems suit the adaptive, responsive online world much better than bulky enterprise-wide ECM projects (and systems), usually compared to the enormous enterprise resource planning (ERP) implementations of yesteryears. Typically, ECM projects strive to manage everything from web content, documents and records, to digital assets and e-mail. As a result, these types of projects come with a huge resource price tag, as well as cost overruns and delays.

The WCM platform market has not reached maturity yet, and we are seeing vendor consolidation taking place even as new vendors emerge. First and second generation WCM systems are usually still hard to operate, and limit the flexibility of the organization because a lot of functionality is hard-coded or developed as bespoke work and consequently not easy to adapt.

Fortunately, this is changing. Technology has become open, web services based applications are emerging and best practices and standards – such as XHTML, CSS2 and AJAX – are already available. This applies equally to the content provision side as well. Content contributors now have direct and easy access to content creation, editing and publishing functions, and without requiring technical skills.

In short, the right WCM platform will support website consolidation and proliferation equally well, regardless of the number of sites or the amount of web content. And consolidating disparate WCM platforms comes with its own set of business and IT benefits.

When web content management is found wanting

Let us first take a look at some possible shortcomings of poor WCM systems:

- *Content duplication and publication delays:* Many WCM systems cannot adequately manage and maintain massive amounts of content, especially when underline duplicated repeatedly. This applies equally to navigation and presentation data.

  In addition, multiple websites usually involve different technical WCM platforms and suppliers. If these platforms cannot exchange content with each other (which is usually the case), data duplication will increase, aggravating an already-existing maintenance situation.

  There is also the problem with technical and unfriendly user interfaces – compounded further in the case of multiple platforms with disparate user interfaces. This means that content needs to be input and maintained by (or with the help of) a company's IT department or webmaster, or a very small group of 'super users'. Consequently, bottlenecks result and costs increase.

  All this will lead to out-of-date, error-prone and inconsistent content, as well as considerable publishing delays (some users complain of simple text changes taking two to three days to go live). In addition, multiple websites usually mean multiple web marketing agencies with additional related costs.
- *Inconsistent site presentation and navigation:* Running multiple sites with disparate WCM systems could also result in a company's websites all having a different look and feel, and navigating differently (something visitors find tedious and disconcerting).

Bad for business
Critically, if not addressed and resolved these issues could impact the organisation's administration, operations, marketing and IT support activities. This could in turn lead to far-reaching financial and other business consequences:

- *Lost business:* Badly managed content could frustrate visitors and tempt them to look elsewhere for 'satisfaction', resulting in business being lost or customer satisfaction jeopardised.
- *No 'cross pollination':* Unwieldy or non-uniform navigation could even discourage visitors from accessing a company's other related sites, resulting in the loss of 'cross pollination' benefits.
- *Tarnished image:* Intangibles, such as brand or company image, could be damaged by delivering a different and inconsistent image or message at each company website.
- *More costs, less control:* Finally, maintaining multiple, disparate WCM platforms with complex user interfaces could mean increased IT and marketing costs and related resources. It also could mean loss of content control.

The challenge of course lies in selecting the right WCM platform and equally important: putting the right processes in place in order to avert these pitfalls.

The *right* web content management platform

Websites should offer a homogeneous, powerful, company and brand message providing a great customer experience. At the same time, web content needs to be well managed, and simple and user-friendly to access and navigate. That is the end-goal, but how can this be achieved? The obvious answer is to consolidate web control under a single, uniform and dedicated WCM platform.

Enter Morello
This paper uses the Mediasurface WCM platform, Morello, as an example of a best-in-class WCM platform solution.

Morello enables organisations to successfully manage huge amounts of web content on a single website, or multiple websites. In addition, this WCM system functions independently of delivery network, channel or medium: public internet, intranet, extranet, mobile devices or print. It has been successfully implemented in many large companies and government institutions, all of which previously had problems supporting large or multiple websites effectively and efficiently.

Key requirements

A WCM platform should provide the following features and characteristics that translate into business benefits:

- *Uniformity and consistency:* One way to avoid duplication and inconsistency is to separate content (including navigational and presentation data), from the computer programming and procedural part of a web page, and treat it as 'normal' company data.

  This means maintaining a <u>single</u> copy of all content items and related data. At publication time, the relevant content is then re-packaged in a specific style-template and integrated with the rest of the web page. In this way content can be re-used while ensuring it is current and consistent. This also helps reduce the risk of input errors, as well as provide consistent branding and localised WCM.

  Unlike most solutions in this category, Morello completely separates and manages – using a repository – web content and website navigation and presentation data. This removes the main complexities and risks associated with website maintenance, and firmly separates the roles of content contributor and webmaster.

  There are two main functions to support this: Content Explorer and Site Planner.

  Content Explorer, as the name suggests, handles website content. It provides non-technical users with normal content creating, editing and storage functionality. In fact, Microsoft Office users would have no difficulty using this function. Content Explorer is not limited to plain text processing. It can also handle a variety of documents (PDFs, for instance), as well as image, audio and video files (including podcasts).

  Site Planner deals with the navigation and presentation data. It offers the webmaster (or whoever is responsible for a specific online channel) the means to easily manage the website's structure, layout and look and feel. What's more, all of this can be changed without affecting the underlying content.

  Morello's 'in context' editing is exceptionally useful to non-technical users, as well as the experienced webmaster. This 'what you see is what you get' mode, not available on most systems, allows users to see immediately what their work will look like when published through a specific online channel. Furthermore, users can do all their editing in the 'context' of a particular channel. This is most useful because channels usually come with their own (formatting and presentation) peculiarities and restrictions.

  At the click of the mouse – and in real-time – the latest version of content (including any changes to the website's structure or presentation) goes online with the proper authorisation.

  Thanks to its repository, Morello can re-use and re-purpose any type of content. This means that a single item of data placed in the repository can be referred to and accessed repeatedly:
  - From different websites, menus or navigational aids;
  - Under different titles and categories;
  - Through different networks and channels;
  - With a unique URL for each occurrence.

This eliminates unnecessary duplication, as well as the risk of input errors, inconsistencies and out-of-date material being published.

- *Increased efficiency, effectiveness and productivity:* A user-friendly interface with the right functionality will get business-related users engaged and motivated to create, maintain and publish web content. Morello users do not require technical skills or knowledge to do all of this.

  Analysis shows that web content 'belongs' with the people directly involved in its creation, editing and publication (not unlike word processing). That's why many companies place their internet under the responsibility of the publishing departments and not IT. According to a web producer at one such company, the technology is less important. After all, it's the content that matters. (Not entirely true, but point taken.)

  Enabling content contributors to process the content themselves could generate further savings in IT and marketing resources, as well as improve publishing turnaround times.

  One business-critical advantage of Morello is its ability to make website content faster and easier to create, maintain and manage. Morello's user-friendly interface is a contributing factor to its success. "Publishing content is so quick and simple. We just create the content once and then it's a simple press of a button and we can publish it in two countries," says Jan Chalmet of Studio 100, an entertainment company. "And on top of that, Morello lets us implement changes in real-time. That means that changes are immediately visible to all the users."

  Morello's speed and efficiency can improve productivity by drastically reducing the time to go live by placing the day-to-day management of the websites in the hands of the marketing people.

Morello also keeps costs and resources to a minimum. New Star Asset Management, a UK-based fund manager, managed to reduce an annual charge by 68% in the first year of installation, and 94% in year two. The bulk of the pre-Morello costs were paid to external design agencies for maintaining the company's 15 individual and micro websites. These all operated off different development platforms and had a variety of brand designs. Morello also reduced training, IT and operational costs thus achieving a ROI within six months.

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- *Secure maintenance environment:* Of course, the deployment environment will also need to be secured against unauthorised access, and content protected against tampering. Moving content processing from the 'controlled' environment of the webmaster or IT department to a more open one of the business user raises security concerns. So does unstructured blogging content, where creation takes place from both within, as well as outside, a company's firewall.

  That is why all Morello operations and data are properly secured through very strict access and authorisation-level assignment and authentication procedures. A secure workflow ensures that relevant content is routed through, and approved by, the appropriate departments before it can be published. What this means is that, regardless of content source, Morello's tight security will ensure that no content is changed or published without the proper authorisation and approval.

Balancing act

In conclusion, here is some food for thought. Opting for website consolidation, proliferation or both are decisions based on business cases involving benefits, costs and risks.

Likewise, implementing a (new) WCM platform, like any IT project, involves hardware, software

and implementation costs. This outlay should be evaluated against such benefits as significantly reduced annual costs of software licences, hardware maintenance and IT support.

And finally, there are intangibles to consider. How do you, for instance, calculate the financial value of vastly improved business and editorial processes or satisfied stakeholders? Conversely, what are the business costs and risks of not giving these intangibles their due attention?

Executive summary

The internet is a critical business tool, even for government institutions and other not-for-profit organisations that adopt a business-like approach. Not surprisingly, organisations are seeking ways to ensure that their websites are efficient and effective.

There is a perception that consolidation improves websites and web content management (WCM), and proliferation complicates things. There is some truth in it.

There is also some confusion as to whether organisations should consolidate their websites, operate multiple websites, or in some cases, do both. In fact, this decision does not have much to do with website management, and should be based on an organisation's overall business strategy.

Good website management means good WCM, because content is the critical component of a website. And the best way to achieve this is to consolidate web control under a single, user-friendly WCM platform. Significantly, good WCM has little to do with the number of websites and the amount of content.

The right WCM platform ensures consistent branding, error-free content for sharing and faster publication, as well as centralized IT, content maintenance and localised content management. Web-content responsibility and processing are rightly placed in the hands of the business-oriented contributors. Brand management and site-structure control are returned to Marketing. And IT remains responsible for the deployment of the technical infrastructure, and its performance and security. However, the challenge lies in selecting the right WCM platform.

Mediasurface's Morello provides a best-in-class WCM IT platform with a familiar Windows-style interface. Business-oriented users can add, remove, modify or publish web content securely and almost instantaneously. Deployment of the technical infrastructure, performance and security remain with IT. This not only reduces marketing, operational and IT costs, but it also decreases 'time to web', increases employees' engagement with a company's websites and improves the overall quality of its online communications.

Undoubtedly, a good WCM system delivers attractive business benefits. But the preparatory work and system implementation is not risk-free and could also demand a considerable investment in equipment and manpower. It is a clear question of weighing both sides, and looking at the bottom-line.

IT recommends it
users love it
serious websites run on it

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