



Taking the "geek" out of your Web site management strategy

CrownPeak Technology's VP of marketing and product strategy discusses how in today's digital landscape, technology is becoming a non-issue when it comes to how we talk to our customers and more importantly how our customers talk to us.

When I was a teenager, my grandfather, a Scotsman, would scoff at me as I walked by with my headphones on. He would literally yank them off my head and then regale me with stories about life during the '20s and '30s.

"We dinna ha'e any of these new fangled contraptions," he would say in his thick brogue. "Nothing like yer fancy wee walkabouts." (He meant my Sony Walkman.) "In our day, we ha'e a radio that filled the wall in the living room and tha' was it."

So, just a few days ago, as I was holding one of the new iPod Shuffles in my hand -- amazed at its sheer lack of anything resembling size -- I found myself saying to its owner, "You know, I remember when these things were the size of bricks."

Thankfully, I caught myself before I actually became the embodiment of my grandfather, wistfully explaining the audio quality differences between a 60- and 90-minute audio cassette.

Since its launch in 2001, the iPod has taken a mere six years to completely transform the music business. Before the iPod existed there were scores of other MP3 players available on the market from a myriad of providers. Say what you will about Apple marketing – the strength of its user interface and everything else – at its absolute core, the iPod is just a portable harddrive that plays a variety of music, images and (now) video codecs. Yes, the true reason for Apple's success is because it simply took the geek out of digital portable music.

Interestingly, Apple may have found itself at another tipping point with the iPhone. Combined with the explosion of social networking, this device, and others like it, may (and "may" is the operative word) have the ability to take the geek out of how we use mobile devices to access web content. The evolution of interfaces to web content has fundamentally changed the game for those of us who manage websites, but maybe not in a way that is immediately evident.

Arguably, managing websites and digital content has become much easier in the last two years. From web content management systems, integrated email campaign management tools, bid management tools, search systems and analytics that actually measure user interactions, the solutions to help us talk to customers through our websites are now plentiful and economical.

But, just when we thought we had a handle on what was going on, along comes this Web 2.0 and AJAX, XML, MOSOSO, RSS feeds and social networking stuff, and now we're back to square one. We're asking our geeks to explain what it all means before we sally forth with a web strategy that supports our business.

I've been recently exploring the depths of social networking solutions. I kid you not, I currently have a list of more than 50 companies who can "*provide an AJAX-based, wicked cool solution for RSS, Forums and other 2.0 on-demand social networking tools.*"

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I remember back in the day when all this was simply called "community."

Here's the conclusion I've reached: the same technology evolution that has made it easier for us to manage our online presence has also made it easier for customers to decide how they want to be marketed to. For every ExactTarget, Salesforce.com and DoubleClick (now Google) out there, there are mashed-up Firefox extensions and Web 2.0 sites waiting to find a way around it.

But this explosion in social networking and web content tools for the user, ironically, is where the game is profoundly changing. We can no longer afford to simply talk to our customers – we must *engage* them. And, maybe more importantly, let them engage with each other.

The key here is that technology itself is quickly becoming (or should quickly become) a non-issue. What matters is not the totality of features we offer on our site, but the frequency and quality of the conversation. Who cares if we can offer personalized content for a user if the content itself is meaningless; they can't access it using their chosen device, or worse, it's not even in their native language.

We need to completely change our paradigm and get out of the "we're all publishers" mindset. Even if we are literally the publisher of an online magazine, we're not publishers. Publishers talk and desperately hope that people like what they are saying. Today, we're more accurately (and simply) stewards of information. The internet and our web strategy (not just our site) makes it easier for us to communicate more effectively and profitably with our customers. It *should*, more importantly, enable our customers to easily communicate with us either implicitly or explicitly. So, like any good friend, we should be good listeners as well as good talkers.

How does all this apply in the real world?

As we continue to formulate our digital marketing and website management strategy solutions, consider a few things:

Get out of the homepage, top-down, hierarchical site structure paradigm

I've talked about this in previous whitepapers, but start thinking about your "website" as a wellspring of content your customers will enter from many different sources. They may first comment on your blog, subscribe to an RSS feed or link from elsewhere on the web in order to satisfy a "need," and then visit your site through a deep landing page to offer up their information to you as a way to continue the conversation.

Two things here are key: First, have ways for people to continue that conversation (e.g. a link for more info or to subscribe) and second, follow through with that request. It's your job to continue to add value to the relationship throughout their lifecycle as a customer.

In 2007, it's about understanding

Unless your business model is in global page impressions, aggregate traffic is not nearly as important as understanding who is visiting your site. Consider solutions that allow you to track the relationship of your users to your content.

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Effective web content management goes well beyond presentation

Along with the decentralization of content on your website comes the addition of social networking and content that lives outside your site. This may come in the form of a MySpace or YouTube strategy – or simply developing relationships with external bloggers. Additionally, users may be contributing content, which you should be able to manage through your content management system and reuse. Also remember, whether it's through blogs, publishing RSS, other syndicated feeds, wireless or other formats, making your content easy to consume by these other sites is important.

Managing your website is a process - not a product

Your team is much more important than your tool. Look to add expertise to your team, not features to your software application. Best-of-breed and/or Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) solutions can play an important role here -- not suites of products.

The web is quickly realizing its potential as a unified computing platform, and content and functional integration is becoming easier and easier. There's little reason to not approach your solution using best-of-breed solutions and expertise for whatever you're looking for. A specialized social networking tool vendor understands managing relationships with customers. An email campaign management vendor spends considerable resources to maintain ISP relationships to ensure mail deliverability. A strong web content management vendor has considerable expertise in terms of translation workflow, landing page management, SEO and information architecture expertise. No single company can be great at everything.

Like my comment about the iPod and my grandfather's comments about the radio before it, within a few years, you might be reminiscing to someone about how you can remember when AJAX and social networking and RSS feeds were all the rage. Then, as you change your web strategy to fit the fact that more people access the web using their super newfangled HiDef-capable personal PDA connected to their flying car, you have the flexibility to do so.

Just remember to take the geek out of your web content strategy. Technology doesn't communicate to your customers, you do.