

Tip of the Content Iceberg

Advice for Successfully Migrating Massive Web Catalogs Online

Have you ever felt like your website is slowly suffocating under the weight of its own catalog content? Is most of your marketing organization's time spent managing the content catalog? The size and disorganization of many organizations' product or marketing content catalog is a major impediment to their digital marketing efforts.

Most of my career has centered around one main problem: how to effectively manage large volumes of content. Whether it's a several hundred thousand SKU product catalog, images of every car sold in the US since 1998, or cataloging and managing terabytes of digital assets with disparate and complex licensing rules, most organizations have large volumes of content, essential to their business. Dealing with this content is complex, but especially when attempting to use content to drive digital experiences, such as a company's website or digital marketing.



SUPPOSITION

When most businesses approach migrating their large content catalogs to a new platform, they start with the wrong approach. This results in massive overruns in implementing the solution and still, many of the most organized companies tend to have many implementation challenges. They often have less user experience success and a legion of frustrated, burnt-out developers and authors.

Most organizations approach a content catalog migration as an "all-in-one" release of an interdependent app, which is supposed to solve all of the organization's problems. Unfortunately, as this approach does not require enforcing organization of the content and is too massive and unwieldy to implement, the "all-in-one" approach fails.

Story after story comes out where an organization runs into this same problem and the resulting costs are as shocking as they are preventable. So how can organizations avoid this mess?



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SHOW SUCCESS EARLY

Many organizations attempt to perform a digital platform migration of their primary website, all in one massive effort. By doing it all at once, organizations can't focus on doing one thing right.



To do complete website re-platforming all at once will require an organization to focus on:

- Redesigning / re-skinning
- Marketing Strategy
- Data Migration
- Platform Migration
- Legacy Integrations

All the moving pieces are hard to manage successfully. Instead, focus on implementing something small but important first, to show the potential in the new platform, before biting off a full migration. This can be a new landing page, microsite for a conference, or independent sub-section of the new site. Ideally, this effort should:

- Not require extensive integrations
- Be important and visible to the business
- Be implemented with the organization's new design and platform
- Be well tracked through appropriate analytics

This is the chance for the organization to try out the new platform, improve the new design, and work out the kinks before taking on the complete migration. Instead of a long, silent waiting period before the big launch, the business and customers can see value quickly and give feedback. Implementing a successful solution increases the business' confidence in the platform and the solution's overall success.

UNLOCK THE VALUE OF YOUR ORGANIZATION'S CONTENT

If your organization hasn't already, it needs to critically evaluate how it organizes and exposes its catalog content. This is a difficult process and neither the challenge nor the benefits should be shortchanged.

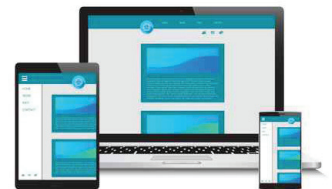
Why organize? Content is only as useful as it is accessible. Properly categorizing and organizing content will allow the organization and clients to leverage the data in new and unexpected ways. The content organization will also inform the design of the solution for exposing the content.

The ideal solution for exposing the catalog content uses RESTful web services to allow for dynamic access to the data in multiple formats. This specific interchange is recommended for a couple reasons:

- It is platform agnostic
- It's easy to implement and understand
- It does not presuppose a specific usage
- It forces consideration of how data is organized

On the other hand, SOAP web services require bloat and are difficult to work with. Even worse, FTP drops and bulk file transfers dramatically increase development time and make the final solution fragile and difficult to maintain.

Once the catalog content is organized and formatted it can be used in different ways and multiple consuming services.



EXPOSE YOUR CONTENT

The number one problem most organizations face when trying to migrate their large catalog is internal. No one is perfect when it comes to organizing their data, but B2B organizations have particular challenges with organizing and exposing their content. All of an organization's content should be:

- Accessible from a single data store or system
- Available without unnecessary VPN or security gateways
- Supportive of modern authentication, access, and exchange standards
- In a consistent format

Organizations may face considerable opposition from internal bureaucracy concerned about security, compliance, and, frequently, their own inertia. These reasons sound valid, and certainly compliance and security requirements are important, but security does not require obscurity, and compliance does not exclude accessibility.

Ultimately, this content is the lifeblood of an organization's digital efforts. It's the organization's products, documentation, marketing materials, and everything else required to support digital marketing efforts.

Don't let your organization's bureaucracy stifle your organization's digital success.

LET TOOLS DO WHAT THEY DO BEST

Investing in a new content management system is a significant expense in time and money, and organizations certainly want that investment to be fully realized. This does not have to mean, however, that every single thing needs to be shoved into the new platform.

Most content management systems are built specifically around managing unstructured content, this does not mean structured content cannot be stored, but it is not the system's forte. Instead of forcing an uncomfortable paradigm, each system should interact through a common service layer, allowing various systems to provide value in what it is best suited to do.

This allows the site to be decomposed into multiple functional sections, but still interoperate as a single website.



BREAK A SITE INTO MANAGEABLE PARTS

Does a jobs sub site really need access to your catalog data or do your product pages need access to your ERP? Separating a website into functional sections allows for easier implementation, lower complexity, and a faster rollout.

Of course, the concern will be how to make it feel like a unified solution. Consistent design is a start. However the real key is using RESTful web services to integrate the website through standard content formats over HTTP.

When the project starts, establish a shared set of templates and ensure the stylesheets and front end code are set up to support multiple properties using the same styles. This will require a strong front end development team and excellent change management, but will ensure consistency and save effort over the long run. A recommended approach to managing the complexity of sharing front end code across multiple properties is to version the front end codebase separate from the functional section codebases.

Another initial task will be working with the Managed Services and System Architecture teams to design the integration between the new and legacy platforms. The solution will likely require HTTPD (Hypertext Transfer Protocol Daemon) magic and chicken wire, but will only serve to push the technical teams to get off the legacy platform as soon as possible.

Once the solution architect has broken the site into functional sections and the business has prioritized the sections, each section can be handled in priority order, providing the business with the maximum return up front. An important thing to keep in mind throughout the process is the end goal: a complete migration. Publishing and promoting a timeline and plan will help ensure all parties keep this end goal in mind.

INTEGRATE EARLY; ITERATE OFTEN

Once an organization's digital solutions can access well organized content catalog and your site is based on flexible integrations, every new project and site is an opportunity to learn, improve the site, and leverage content in new and innovative ways.

New widgets, functionality, and data sources can be integrated into existing properties, and updating the look and feel of a site can be almost as easy as updating the version number of the front end code. The process of iterative improvement will result in constantly improving solutions and quality of implementation.

In this era of digital transformation, maintaining constant momentum is a requirement for maintaining relevancy and market share. Consumers expect problematic experiences to be improved and new features and content are needed to keep them engaged.

MOVING FORWARD

Extensive analytics and analysis allow the business to make intelligent decisions and expand the relevance and footprint of the solution, while the new agile solution will now be able to react to and support the business' objectives.

Instead of being constrained by catalog content, the catalog content will be a driver of the organization's digital marketing success.

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