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## It's Time To Break Up With Your Custom-Coded WCM

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It's hard to believe, but some enterprises still use custom-coded Web content management (WCM) solutions. However, consumer demands have forced firms to shift from just managing and publishing Web sites to the daunting complexities of multichannel customer engagement, and it has become untenable to build and maintain the required tools. With few exceptions, any firm with a custom-coded WCM platform should begin transitioning to a commercial or open source solution. For some firms, open source products offer the attractions of custom-coding with lesser software development and maintenance burdens.

### HOLDOUTS OFFER EXCUSES FOR DEVOTION TO CUSTOM WCM

Fifteen years after the introduction of commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) WCM solutions, some enterprises still use custom-coded WCM tools. These holdouts cite similar reasons for resisting the charms of commercial products, but none of the excuses hold up under scrutiny:

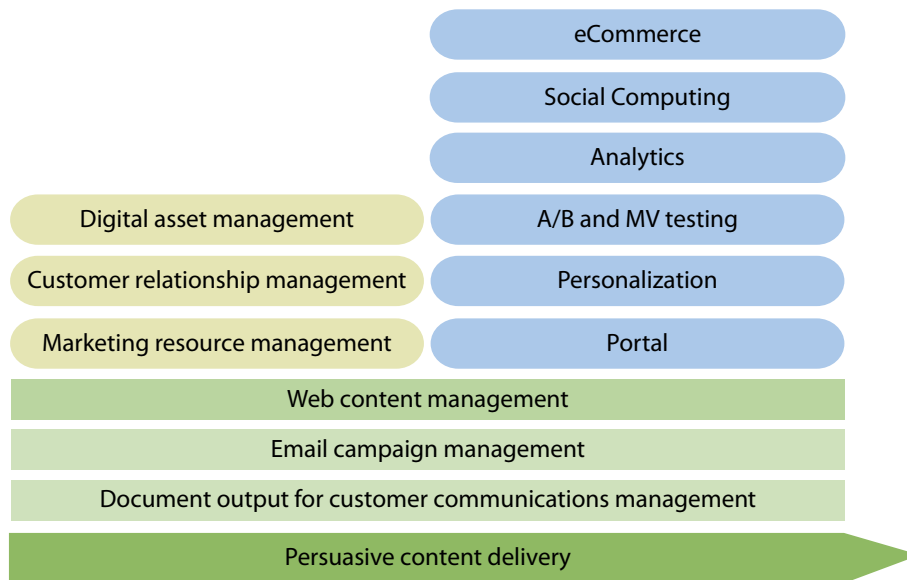
- **“We have unique requirements.”** Many first-generation WCM solutions only supported static, one-size-fits-all brochure-ware sites. This made them a poor fit for companies — such as media — with frequent and/or high-volume publishing needs and specific user interface requirements. Today, open source WCM relieves such companies of the need to develop and maintain the underlying content management fundamentals (i.e., check-in, checkout, workflows, etc.) while enabling customization for unique requirements.
- **“Commercial WCM solutions are overkill.”** In their attempts to differentiate, the high-end WCM vendors sometimes introduce functionality that the market doesn't yet need. For example, targeting and segmentation capabilities have been available for nearly a decade but only recently came into common use. But the fact that you don't exploit most of your car's performance is not a good reason to try to build your own. Moreover, as the demand for engaging Web and multichannel experiences grows, advanced WCM functionality becomes more necessary.
- **“Commercial WCM products are too expensive.”** For many companies, the Web has become the primary channel for attracting and servicing customers.<sup>1</sup> Firms should judge the investment required to support an engaging online presence (of which the WCM licenses are a very small part) relative to the revenues and other benefits it creates. Custom-coded WCM can require a substantial budget for frequent — and sometimes redundant — development cycles to create new or improved functionality.

- **“We have to keep our developers happy.”** One major European travel brand wanted to replace its custom WCM. But the WCM developer also created the company’s beloved and, they felt, irreplaceable booking engine. When the developer refused to cooperate with commercial WCM vendors to integrate the booking engine, the company decided to limp along with the custom solution. In other cases, companies grow addicted to the attention they receive from their dedicated developers. “Our developers will build anything we want,” said the marketing manager at a large consumer brand. “Would we get that kind of attention from a big vendor?”

### But Multichannel Customer Engagement Renders Custom WCM Untenable

Companies now feel the pressure to move beyond a Web-centric digital presence. For example, they want to be present on social sites, develop mobile strategies, and launch coordinated multichannel marketing campaigns. Or internally, they want to enable employees with integrated, contextualized, and mobile information workplaces. WCM remains a key component of the customer engagement software ecosystem (see Figure 1). Leading WCM vendors are rapidly introducing new features that support differentiated multichannel customer experiences.<sup>2</sup> This rapid expansion of WCM capabilities and integration points makes it foolhardy for any but the rare firm to continue with a custom-built solution.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 1** Complex Customer Engagement Software Ecosystem Precludes Custom Development



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Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

## ARE YOUR WCM REQUIREMENTS A BUILD EXCEPTION TO THE BUY RULE?

If your organization is having trouble letting go of custom-coded WCM, take a hard and honest look at these five factors and evaluate whether your company (see Figure 2):

1. **Uses outdated programming languages.** Forrester interviewed a major US apparel brand that built an award-winning intranet using Microsoft ASP Classic. Even the company's IT department considers ASP Classic a deprecated technology; the intranet's sole programmer had to learn it in his spare time.
2. **Can't attract and retain developers.** Developers care about their careers and want to acquire valuable and transferable skills. Forrester clients report they have a hard time convincing good developers that they should bother mastering a unique system, even if it uses a popular language like PHP.
3. **Lacks standards for WCM integration.** WCM is no longer a silo application. In our recent global WCM survey, nearly 40% of respondents said that enterprise application integration was the primary area in which current WCM solutions need improvement. Custom-coded WCM usually lacks the support for standards, such as CMIS and WSRP, which simplify integration.<sup>4</sup>
4. **Needs to move from WCM to multichannel engagement.** Managing the Web content life cycle is now only the beginning. COTS vendors have introduced capabilities or integrations to address marketing-centric analytics, site optimization, and multichannel distribution. Custom-coded WCM systems will have a hard time keeping up.
5. **Really wants to run a software development business.** Most enterprises today realize the benefits of outsourcing and focusing on the core business. If a company sells airline seats or financial products, should it also run a software business?

## Open Source WCM Offers The Advantages Of Both Build And Buy

Open source (OS) content management vendors sometimes claim that their products avoid the drawbacks of both the commercial and custom approaches.<sup>5</sup> Enterprises deploying open source WCM will likely need support either from the vendor or from a third-party firm. Also, the open source can act as a development resource as well, although this comes with support risks.<sup>6</sup> Still, OS WCM could be attractive for companies with a perceived need to highly customize the WCM environment. Companies that are considering open source as an alternative to custom WCM should evaluate the open source community in addition to the software and ensure that the community shares the same business problems and requirements.<sup>7</sup>

**Figure 2** Are You A Build Exception To The Buy Rule?

**Consider moving to a COTS solution if you answer "Yes" to most of these questions.**

Question	Yes	No
1. Does your custom WCM utilize outdated or rare programming languages?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Do you have trouble attracting and retaining fresh development talent?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Do you struggle to keep the WCM integrated with other systems for content deployment, business process support, or multisite management?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Do you need to support integrated and rich multichannel engagement?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Do you want to get out of the business of developing your own software solutions?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

### LEAVING BEHIND CUSTOM WCM REQUIRES PATIENCE AND CAREFUL PLANNING

Separating from a custom-coded solution is a complex change management problem that could easily become an expensive failure. The WCM system and key workflows have fused together, and employees responsible for those processes have developed shortcuts or workarounds to accommodate the quirks of the WCM that they might no longer be aware of. Success depends on taking the time, effort, and money to identify the landmines so they can be avoided or defused. Organizations should plan to:

- **Involve the right people.** Organizations need to involve the people in the trenches — those who care for, and feed, Web sites — in the review process. Changes may impact them the most, and they will have the most influence on its success.
- **Ask stakeholders what they do, not what they want.** User-centric research is about users, not the technology. Content and collaboration professionals should initially try to avoid discussing WCM functionality entirely and instead ask, “What are you responsible for? How do you accomplish it? What would make your job easier?”
- **Identify key features of the current solution that need to be preserved.** Moving to a COTS solution may involve some functionality compromises. Firms should identify and prioritize current features that are crucial to business results.
- **Use scenarios for the vendor selection process.** To ensure that the selected COTS solution can be implemented and launched without disrupting critical business processes, content and collaboration (C&C) professionals should utilize their requirements research to create

detailed use cases — including those involving application integration — that reflect current and projected requirements. Then they should ask the vendors to show how they support these scenarios, rather than sitting through canned vendor demos.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### PLAN A DIGNIFIED EXIT FROM CUSTOM-CODED WCM

Whether a custom solution has been a major annoyance or has provided great support, WCM and the associated technologies have grown too complex to manage without the support of a commercial vendor or open source community. When creating a WCM transition strategy, C&C professionals should:

- **Look for a great vendor relationship, not just great technology.** One day you have a direct line to in-house or agency resources to do your custom-coding bidding. The next day, you're one among 1,000 or more customers at a WCM vendor. Will they care about you and your needs? Use the vendor review process and client reference calls to identify a vendor that wants to form a long-term partnership, rather than just close a license deal. Consider trading one vendor's superior technology for another's proven devotion to client needs.
- **Consider open source but ensure that it fits.** Proven and stable open source content management vendors offer a solid WCM core and the ability to extend it with advanced functionality. But ensure that you will receive the support you need from the vendor or a third-party consultancy, as well as the user community.
- **Break the habit of overcustomization.** Custom WCM promotes a "we can just build it" attitude. Continuing this approach in the COTS WCM environment encourages scope creep and overcustomization, and ultimately, increased support costs. Forrester finds that firms with successful WCM implementations keep customizations to a minimum by defining a process that can be used to make decisions on whether or not to proceed with any customization.<sup>8</sup>

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In Forrester's August 2009 survey of 100 eBusiness and channel strategy professionals, the Web leads call centers as organizations' second most profitable channel, just slightly below in-person. See the February 5, 2010, "[Using Digital Channels To Create Breakthrough Multichannel Relationships](#)" report.
- <sup>2</sup> For more information on the need for — and ability of — WCM solutions to support marketing-centric "persuasive content" scenarios, see the June 1, 2009, "[The Forrester Wave™: Web Content Management For External Sites, Q2 2009](#)" report and see the August 18, 2009, "[Five Additional Options To Consider For Web Content Management](#)" report.

- <sup>3</sup> To support the rich, dynamic experiences that customers have grown to expect on the Web, I&KM pros need to strategically knit together a mix of on-premise and cloud offerings from an ecosystem of providers. See the February 8, 2010, "[The Online Customer Engagement Software Ecosystem](#)" report.
- <sup>4</sup> Content Management Interoperability Services (CMIS) promotes interoperability between content management systems. Web Services for Remote Portlets (WSRP) facilitates the publication of content from a WCM into a remote portlet container. For more details of how WCM is becoming integrated into enterprise applications, see the March 29, 2010, "[Web Content Management Will Weave Its Way Into More Enterprise Applications](#)" report.
- <sup>5</sup> According to a presentation by a member of the consulting firm Optaros, open source content management offers this option: "Don't build or buy. Instead, assemble." Source: Jeff Potts' "ECM and Open Source Software: A Disruptive Force in ECM Solutions" presentation as seen on SlideShare (<http://www.slideshare.net/jpotts/ecm-and-open-source-software-a-disruptive-force-in-ecm-solutions-presentation>).
- <sup>6</sup> C&C professionals should consider four main factors when deciding whether or not to use open source ECM: licenses, operational support, implementation resources, and product maturity. See the August 5, 2009, "[The Four Decision Factors For Open Source Enterprise Content Management](#)" report.
- <sup>7</sup> Little or no software license fees are the obvious advantage of open source. But C&C pros must consider three additional factors when estimating TCO and deciding whether or not to use open source ECM: support, available resources, and product maturity. See the June 19, 2008, "[Web Content Management And Open Source](#)" report and see the August 5, 2009, "[The Four Decision Factors For Open Source Enterprise Content Management](#)" report.
- <sup>8</sup> C&C professionals should define a customization governance process for WCM, including submitting all customization requests to an IT-business committee that scrutinizes time, effort, and prospective ROI. See the November 14, 2008, "[Best Practices: WCM Adoption In External Web Sites](#)" report.