

The Critical Member in any CMS Project The Content Engineer

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In order to create a CMS that meets customer requirements there must be a strong relationship between graphic design, content and how humans interact with that content. This relationship must be expressed as effective communication between the graphic designers and the content engineers. That's a new term we just coined... a Joomla Content Engineer. This is a person that intimately understands the technology for the purpose of getting content into the positions requested by the graphic designers.

In Joomla, or any CMS, the main portion of the site is content that changes on a regular basis. A blog for example has new posts each day. A Joomla site that covers politics will have frequent stories about the candidates. Stories, posts, content items ... they all mean the same thing. It's copy and images that someone creates via an administrator area. A few checkboxes are clicked, a button is pressed and the new content appears in the content area of the site.

It's easy to see where content appears on sites. It's usually the top and left area where it begins. The new material will be listed first with older items underneath.

In a news site, you only want the current news on the home page. The old news gets "archived" and can be found by searching. All simple stuff for Joomla to handle.

Things get muddy in a hurry when graphic designers create clever attractive visual widgets without including the content engineer.



A module can also be called an extension, a plug-in or a widget

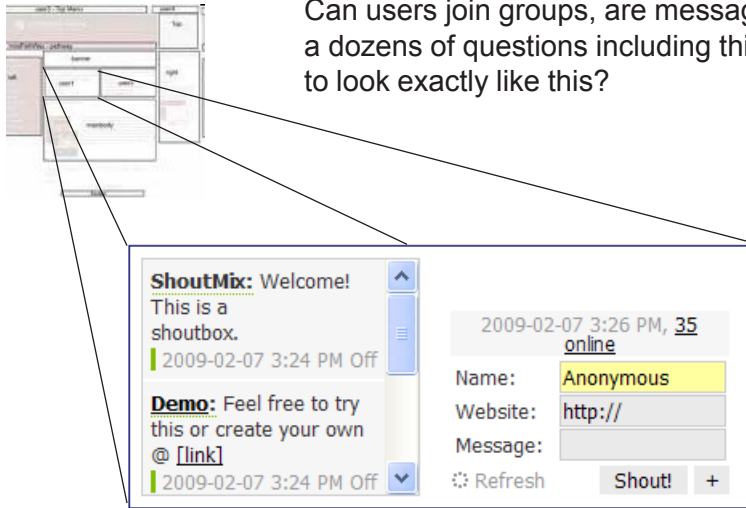
This is the problem with allowing a graphics team to create a website design without the content engineer. What you end up with is an attractive hollow concept of what looks good. Now the content engineer must dissect each of the graphical elements to understand the desired function. This is true for any CMS, not just Joomla. For example, Joomla has a built-in function called Latest News which will display a list of the most recently posted content items. It's extremely useful for a graphic design to know this, and to have working knowledge of the CMS they are designing for. If not, then the content engineer needs to sit by their side as they sketch the initial layout. "Yes, that's easy. No, that's not easy."

If a graphic designer works alone, and has no CMS experience, they will likely produce something that can't be fully implemented without extensive content engineering.

Let's look at an example...

A Simple Example: Shoutcasting - Easily Done, Maybe

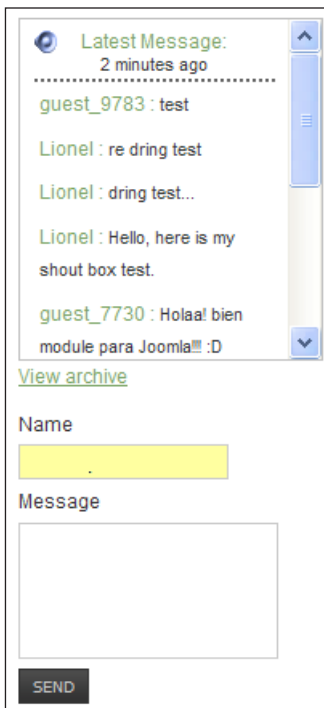
In this example, it appears the designers came up with an attractive way for visitors to be able to exchange realtime messages. We say “appears” because looking at just this graphic, we don’t really know how this works. Do visitors need to be logged-in? Does it support IP bans? Sound alerts? HTML editor? Smiley faces allowed? Captcha required for unregistered?



From <http://shoutmix.com>

Can users join groups, are messages archived? We could rattle off a dozens of questions including this important one: Does this need to look exactly like this?

Joomla has no built-in shoutbox feature so in order to achive this function, something needs to be added. But the point is that just this one feature in the layout requires significant detail so the content engineer knows what to find/modify or build.



Shoutbox from joomla.batjo.nl

Here is one version of a shoutbox that is Joomla-ready, but as you can see, it looks nothing like the above. It has many features but it’s impossible to know if what it has meets the requirements because looking at a graphic doesn’t define customer expectations.

Could the shoutbox on the left be morphed into something that looks like the above? Sure. But how it looks is only part of the assignment.

A design created using a tool like Adobe Illustrator is fine, but it doesn’t tell the content engineer what he/she needs to know:

***How do all these widgets work?
What exactly must they do?***

In conclusion, there’s nothing wrong with allowing a graphic design team to build the vision of a new website. But when it comes time to convert that design into a working system, the content engineer is going to need lots of answers else you will end up spending huge amounts of time and money guessing at what might meet the unknown requirements.

Still not sure about the role of a content engineer? ...

More About The Content Engineer

The difference between people who are writers and those who are not is not necessarily the quantity or quality of their ideas. It is sometimes the simple fact that the first ones know how to organize their knowledge in a readable format.

This also applies to building a website. You may have lots of content and bright ideas, but as long as you fail to organize it into a functional web structure, all you have is an uncontrollable mess with little or no appeal to most visitors.

The content engineer is the one who plays the role of fitting this content and ideas into the Joomla containers. The CE is the one who makes sure that there is a functional base for what your website wants to achieve, and that the requirements that this content imposes on the graphic design are clear. The CE knows how to use Joomla features in a smart and economical way, how to enhance them, and how to bend them for maximum functionality and best user experience.

Do not kid yourself. Regardless of how good your website looks, if it is not functional, there is no design or fancy color that can save it. Content is and will always be the ultimate purpose of your online presence. Of course the form in which you dress it is important, but this form must be tailored on the content - and not vice versa.

Excluding the content engineer from the process of web design is as smart as planning how to decorate your cake without knowing how to bake it. There will be no substance to your artistic view, and definitely no pie to eat.

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Joomla will not play the role of your content engineer. Nor will any other CMS.

It is amazing how many people think that they can hop over the content engineering stage by choosing a “better” CMS. While a CMS will offer you the containers into which you can pour your content and will allow you to add more functionality of your own, it will not make decisions for you, nor will organize your mass of unstructured information.

Changing your CMS when you fail to tame your content, and hoping that the new piece of technology will fill the void in your organizational skills, is like blaming it on your shoes when you’re not able to dance: no matter how many others you try, your problem will remain the same.

Regardless of the CMS that you choose, somebody will have to play this role: understanding the CMS and being able to manipulate in such a way that it will make a good house for your content.

Content engineering is not only a role, but a necessary stage.

You may understand the CMS technology and, armed with this knowledge, jump confidently right into the template tweaking stage.

What you may forget is that you first have to wear the content engineer hat before trying on that of the graphic designer or template tweeker. Do not get too involved in your artistic views before making sure the requirements imposed on site presentation by the content are clear. Content engineering is a stage that you have to go through before attempting much work on graphic details.

Every now and then otherwise knowledgeable web developers get too involved with their own vision that they risk to forget the priorities. In these cases they have to remember that the functionality and marketability of a website is the number one urgency. Graphic design is a great enhancer of both these qualities, and a catalyst for ideas, but, unlike these two, presentation cannot survive alone.

To make your Joomla site complete, don't forget to install <http://taskhopper.com/dingo>