

Mindshare Studios' Introductory Guide to Content Management Systems

A quick introduction to web-based content management.



What is a CMS?

A **content management system (CMS)** is a web application for creating and managing HTML or other web-based content (such as images, videos, PDFs, etc.) A CMS facilitates content creation, content control, editing, and many essential web maintenance functions. A CMS can also offer a degree of automation (e.g. automatically adding or removing links on a site map). Most CMSs use a **database** to store content, metadata, and/or files that might be needed by the system. A presentation layer displays the content to website visitors based on a set of **templates**.

These systems generate website pages on-demand. The actual HTML may be generated when a user visits a page, or pulled from a cache (for performance reasons). Some of the better known open source systems that produce pages on demand are: Joomla, Drupal and WordPress. The **Mindshare Studios CMS** is built on top the WordPress platform.

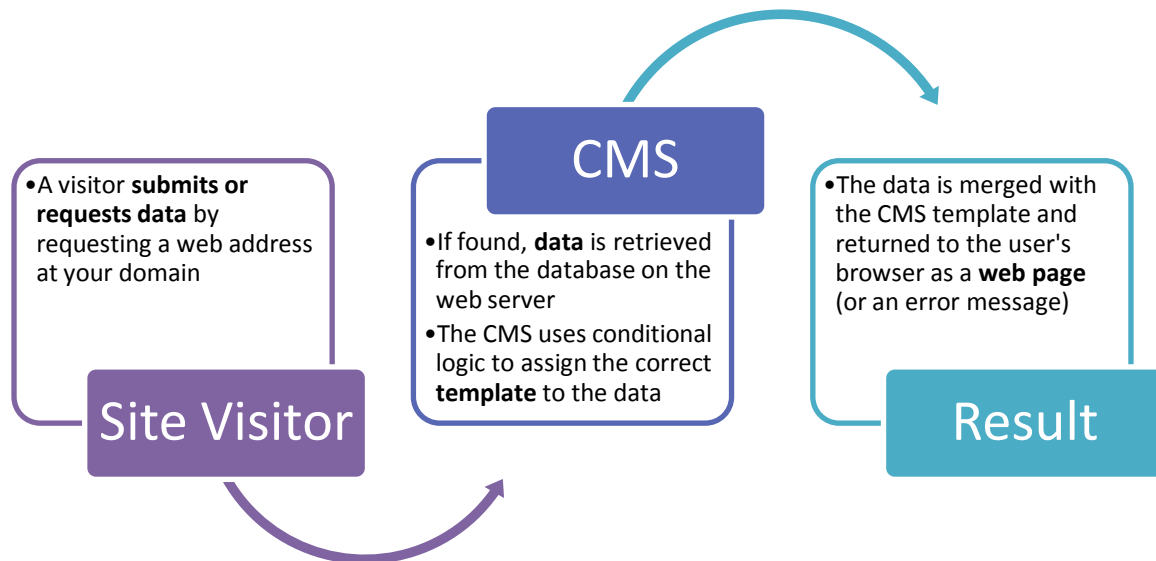


Figure 1. How a CMS renders a web page when it is requested by the user (on-the-fly).

How does a CMS differ from programs like Dreamweaver or FrontPage?

A content management system differs from website editors like Microsoft FrontPage or Adobe Dreamweaver. A CMS enables **non-technical users to make changes to a website with little or no training directly from their browser** (without installing any additional software). Web content management systems typically require an experienced programmer to setup or change features, while exposing many site maintenance functions for non-technical administrators. Administration is done through a secure, browser-based interface (see figure 2).

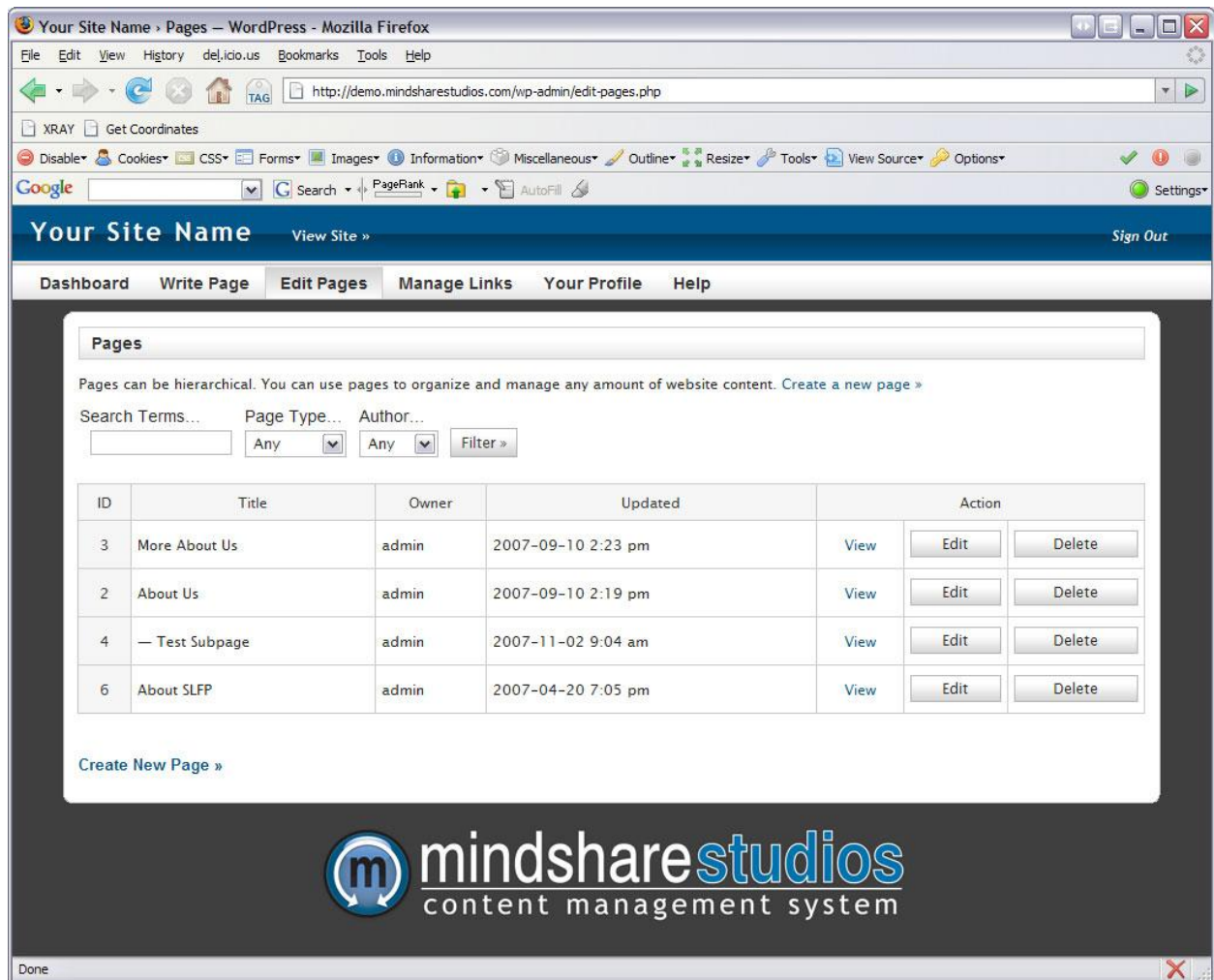


Figure 2. A secure, browser-based interface.

Some key features of a good CMS

A CMS usually provides the following features:

Automated templates

Create standard output templates (usually XHTML and XML) that can be automatically applied to new and existing content, creating one central place to make a change sitewide.

Easily editable content

Most CMS software includes WYSIWYG (“what you see is what you get”) editing tools allowing non-technical individuals to create and edit content.

Scalable feature sets

Most CMSs have plugins or modules that can be easily installed to extend an existing site's functionality. This is often referred to as *extensibility*.

Web standards upgrades

Many CMS solutions usually receive regular updates that include new feature sets and keep the system up to current web standards. Many CMSs are based on open source code and security patches are regularly contributed by the community.

Workflow management

Many CMSs provide a mechanism to control document workflow. For example, a content creator might submit a new page to the website (step 1), and later a copy editor cleans it up (step 2), and then later still, it is approved or denied by an administrator before it is finally published on the website (step 3).

Document management

CMS solutions may provide document life cycle management (e.g. creation, revision, publication, archive, and document destruction).

Other notable features

These are additional features included with Mindshare Studios CMS:

- *Administrative/backend features*
 - Integrated site search
 - Integrated file management and upload
 - Automatic resizing of images
 - MIME-type control
 - URL redirect management
 - Secure user-authentication
 - Automated password reset
 - AJAX enabled form validation
 - Integrated visitor statistics and reports
 - W3C compliant, valid XHTML markup

- *Search Engine Optimization (SEO) features*
 - Automatic sitemap generation
 - Search engine-specific XML sitemap
 - Automated notification to Google, Yahoo, and Ask.com when site content changes
 - Search-friendly URLs
 - Editable custom META keywords and descriptions

- *Content Management Features*
 - Easily modify site content
 - Simple link management
 - Drag and drop page re-ordering
 - Advanced WYSIWYG page editor

How will a CMS help my organization?

Moving from a static HTML website to a dynamic, CMS-based website offers a number of strategic advantages. A website that is powered by a CMS is no longer a simple collection of inert text and image files; it is a functional repository and delivery mechanism for information that allows a high degree of interactivity and extensibility.

Editability

A CMS provides the means for users with *little or no technical knowledge* to create and manage content on your website. This means your organization will save both money and time when simple content edits are needed (by not having to call an outside provider).

Separate content from design

A CMS cleanly *separates the content (or information) from design (or visual presentation)* of the website. This creates a far more maintainable infrastructure for your website. For example, when a company using a CMS decides to redesign the look and feel of their website, the only thing they need to change when using a CMS are the CMS template files. All of the site content is left untouched by the redesign process, greatly simplifying the task. This advantage applies equally well to small design changes (such as adding a new logo to the site header).

Syndication

CMSs also provide easy syndication of your content via RSS. Syndication can be used to add fresh content to any number of sites operated by your organization.

Future development & integration

Using a CMS will generally greatly accelerate the process of developing new features to your website (such as adding forms, social networking capabilities, etc).

Security

Lastly, a CMS provides a more secure, managed environment to host your web-accessible content.

How will a CMS affect my bottom line?

Because most CMS solutions provide such a wealth of features out of the box the total cost of ownership remains extremely low when compared with building a custom solution from scratch. With the maturation of the open source software movement even many of the ongoing maintenance cost are approaching zero (when using a CMS built on an open source project, such as the Mindshare Studios CMS).

In the short term, you can expect to save money on content updates and maintenance (with some tasks being completely eliminated vis-à-vis automation).

Over time, you can expect to save thousands of dollars on security updates and features added after the initial launch.

Postscript

With any luck, this guide has helped you get oriented to the world of content management systems.

Don't hesitate to contact us if you have any questions about how a CMS could be implemented to improve your web presence.

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