

Simplifying Web Design and Management

Words like “easy” and “simple” are used repeatedly by companies marketing website content management systems (CMS) designed to make it possible for non-programmers to do web design. Yet, despite years of hearing about these systems, none really lives up to the hype. There are, however, some interesting new platforms coming up stream that may be moving us closer to the promised land.

Why has developing a “simple” system been so difficult? There are many challenges:

- Ever-evolving technology makes it hard for CMS creators to keep on top of new capabilities (this week everyone wants Twitter integration, last week Facebook, a few months ago video, before that podcasts, blogs, and so on).
- The struggle, always faced by web designers, to create something that will display well in any combination of browser and display settings.
- Perhaps most important: the long-standing usability problem of software that is programmed by and for techies being foisted on untrained staff whose computer expertise doesn't extend beyond basic word processing.

While one would expect that usability assessment would be an integral part of designing software for non-technical users, that doesn't seem to have happened with many CMS platforms. Even big names like Microsoft have messed up on the usability front with programs like SharePoint, which uses the term “site” to refer not just to the overall website, but to every section and sub-section within it.

Another common usability problem is the basic task of text formatting. In every system I've experimented with so far (about fifteen in the past year), trying to apply a different font or style to a block of text often doesn't work as expected and ends up messing up the formatting of the text that follows. You have to know some HTML to go in to the backend and clear out the extra code that sneak in there. Sometimes, you can't even find the offending code: you have to dig deeper into the way your text is interacting with the Cascading Style Sheet (CSS) that is governing the site as a whole.

Platformic (www.platformic.com) is one program that seems to be making breakthroughs in web management usability. The most exciting feature is its ability to develop CSS without needing a programmer or web design software. You simply upload what you want the page to look like, and the program creates the CSS for you. You can then clone the page's look to ensure consistency across the site. However, you can also alter elements of the look to create different layouts. While this flexibility does pose the danger of turning a site into a mess of styles, in disciplined hands

it makes it easier to maintain a consistent overall feel while adapting to the needs of new types of content as they arise.

Company co-founder Claudio Canive explains that unlike traditional web development, where you start by figuring out your home page layout and content, with Platformic it is often best to build the main page last, because it should be fed by the content coming from the rest of the site.

Another feature is the ability to auto-resize images and video. If an image is too big, the whole page layout gets messed up. If you size it correctly for one page but want to re-use the photo elsewhere, you have to create a new image with the correct dimensions.

Platformic automatically adjusts both still images and video to fit the size available. You upload your photo or video once, and use it wherever you want on the site. No more need to create and upload separate thumbnail versions.

Platformic was originally created for the radio industry, so it has a strong emphasis on audio-visual handling. Podcasts automatically open using whatever player the user has installed on their system. The video tool lets the person uploading content pick a screenshot from the video to use as the clickable image that will launch the video—one more time they can skip having to pester the graphics folks for help!

If its founders' marketing skill can match its usability, Platformic may rise to the top of an overcrowded sea of competitors. **UK**

—Tema Frank

Rubes™ By Leigh Rubin



For more Rubes silliness visit www.rubescartoons.com and check out his daily comics, calendars, and books.