

There are two major elements to most web redevelopment projects: the redesign of the existing site, and the selection of a new (or replacement) content management system (CMS).

These two elements reflect the underlying issues that typically drive web projects: the problems with the structure and content of the published site, and issues with the management and publishing of the site.

The temptation can be to select a single provider to deliver both the redesign of the site and the underlying CMS. This would, however, be a mistake.

Instead, organisations are almost always better served by separating out the design and the CMS, and sourcing these from different providers.

Website redesign

The primary reason for the website project is that the current site is *broken*. Typical issues include poor site structure, dated design and out of date content.

To address this, organisations should follow a *user-centred* design process. This involves applying a range of usability and information architecture techniques, such as card sorting and usability testing.

(For more on this, see the earlier articles *What is usability?* and *What is information architecture?*)

Within any region in the world, there are more than a few usability firms who specialise in this process. They have extensive experience with user needs and the redesign process, giving clients confidence that the new design is more effective (and not just more attractive).

Beyond the user-centred design process, there is also the final *visual design*. This produces a final appearance for the site, including the branding, page design, graphics and colours.

This can be provided by a specialist visual designer (often separate from the usability firm). Alternatively, there are full-service design agencies which can cover both the usability and visual design aspects.

When selecting a designer, organisations should carefully evaluate their past experience, as well as the methodologies that they use.

While design agencies may offer a CMS, they can only practically provide expertise with a handful of CMS products (typically 2-3). This leaves no guarantee that the technology will be a good fit, even if the agency's design skills are very strong.

Content management system

As part of many website projects, the organisation will purchase a new (or replacement) content management system (CMS).

Worldwide, there are an estimated 1,000 (or more) products, and within each geographic region there are typically a hundred or more.

These products vary greatly in capability, and it is therefore vital to obtain a product that is a close fit to the specific business requirements.

CMS vendors are (hopefully) skilled at product development and maintenance. While they may provide professional services, these may or may not be as strong as those of specialist design agencies.

Separate design and the CMS

As outlined above, there is a clear line between the design, and the CMS product that it is implemented on. In the marketplace, there are very distinct providers for each service, with no guarantee that a single provider can provide an equally good fit for both elements.

For this reason, it is strongly recommended that organisations separate out the design services and the CMS. The risk of not doing so is that while one element of the final solution may be superb, the other may be a failure.

Design first

Equally importantly, the design should be done first, before selecting a CMS. This recognises that the final design is a *selection criteria* for the CMS product, as no technology is unlimited in its flexibility. The CMS can then be evaluated during the vendor demonstrations for its ability to implement the desired design.