Obtain search in your CMS?

Organisations are looking for a wide range of capabilities when selecting a new content management system (CMS), and search is often one of the desired features.

Almost every site requires a search tool, whether it's a website or intranet. In most cases, there is frustration with the current search, leading to the desire to bundle search as part of the new CMS solution.

The question is: how good are the search capabilities built into CMS products, and when should you make use of them?

Three possibilities

There are three main ways in which search functionality can be obtained when purchasing a content management system:

- The CMS has search built into the package, developed in-house by the CMS vendor.
- A search tool is licensed by the CMS vendor, and tightly integrated into the overall solution.
- A third-party search engine is implemented separately, either purchased from the CMS vendor or obtained elsewhere.

Each of these possibilities is discussed in the following sections.

Search built into the CMS

Recognising that most sites need search, CMS vendors are naturally keen to provide a complete solution for their clients.

In an increasing number of cases, this has led the CMS vendor to develop their own search capability, built into the overall CMS solution.

This search is generally very simple, providing basic search functionality that covers the content contained within the CMS repository.

This search is usually relies on using the functionality provided by the underlying database, limiting the breadth and power of the search that can be delivered.

This generally means that more advanced capabilities are not provided by the built-in search. This may mean that the CMS search has a number of key limitations:

- Limited ability to customise or tailor the operation of the search engine (such as adjusting the search engine weightings).
- Limited indexing capabilities, such as the inability to search the content of documents.
- No support for search usage reports, synonyms or best bets.

This simplicity of search functionality is generally reflected on the published site, with very basic search results pages.

Search licensed by the vendor

Another option explored by vendors is to license an existing commercial search tool for use within the CMS. This can provide significantly more functionality, but can increase the overall cost of the CMS solution.

For this reason, CMS vendors often choose to license a subset of the full search tool, with some of the more advanced or powerful features locked-down or removed.

Third-party search engine

The third option is to implement a separate third-party search engine, either resold via the vendor or purchased elsewhere.

With a large number of well-established products on the marketplace, there are many options to choose from. These range from cheap and simple search tools, to more expensive and powerful offerings.

In many cases, there is no need to directly integrate search and the CMS, beyond having the search 'spider' the published site.

Making a decision

If you have a small site with simple search needs, use the search built into the CMS, as this is the quickest and cheapest way of delivering a solution.

If you have any more complex search requirements, or wish to have greater control over search, implement a third-party solution.

As highlighted in other articles, search solutions must be well-designed to be effective, and a separate tool enables this work to be done.