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# To SharePoint, Or Not, For External Web Site Initiatives

by Stephen Powers and Tim Walters, Ph.D.  
for Information & Knowledge Management Professionals

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by **Stephen Powers and Tim Walters, Ph.D.**

with Kyle McNabb and Keith K. Tsang

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Information and knowledge management (I&KM) professionals have expressed abundant interest in Microsoft Office SharePoint Server — the technology that has a little something for everyone, including document management, search, collaboration, portal, and Web content management (WCM). While SharePoint's WCM functionality can meet some intranet and extranet needs, it does not compare to the capabilities of independent vendors for public-facing, persuasive Web sites. Over-customization can be a major pitfall when using SharePoint for external-facing initiatives. Before selecting SharePoint, I&KM pros need to fully understand just how much customization SharePoint needs to meet their external Web site requirements.

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Forrester interviewed 15 vendor and user companies, which preferred to remain anonymous.

#### **Related Research Documents**

**"SharePoint Success Will Take A Village"**

June 24, 2008

**"Topic Overview: Microsoft Office SharePoint Server 2007"**

April 24, 2008

## ENTERPRISES STRUGGLE WITH UNDERSTANDING SHAREPOINT'S WCM CAPABILITIES . . .

Enterprises have struggled deciding how to properly use SharePoint, largely due to the product's breadth of capabilities in the areas of enterprise content management (ECM) and collaboration, as well as its relative ease of deployment.<sup>1</sup> That struggle extends to the area of WCM. Enterprises that have found success using SharePoint for one initiative often consider using SharePoint for external-facing Web sites, because:

- **Organizations have experienced success with SharePoint for intranets.** Because SharePoint contains a wide array of features — such as search, portal, document management, and collaboration — enterprises have found it an attractive intranet solution. Frequently, marketing and eBusiness departments gain expertise on SharePoint when using it for internal-facing sites, become familiar with its tools and user interfaces, and begin advocating for its use on external-facing sites.
- **Enterprises already have Microsoft enterprise agreements in place.** Many enterprises bring Microsoft SharePoint into the enterprise to support intranet initiatives. And many stakeholders find enterprise licensing of SharePoint and common administrative skills attractive, especially if the technology is used to support external Web initiatives.
- **In-house resources have been trained on SharePoint.** WCM decision-makers frequently complain about the lack of available resources trained in most of the major WCM players in the market. Organizations that already use SharePoint for other initiatives like the idea of moving to a SharePoint-based WCM solution where some in-house expertise already exists.

But Microsoft hasn't positioned SharePoint as a best-of-breed solution for external-facing sites. SharePoint doesn't pretend to offer in depth the many persuasive content features — personalization, targeting, and reporting — that its best-of-breed counterparts have been focusing on over the past 18 months.<sup>2</sup> This presents a dilemma for organizations that have had intranet success with SharePoint, but whose public-facing sites have significantly different requirements.

## . . . AND DON'T FIND SHAREPOINT APPROPRIATE FOR ALL EXTERNAL WEB SITE INITIATIVES

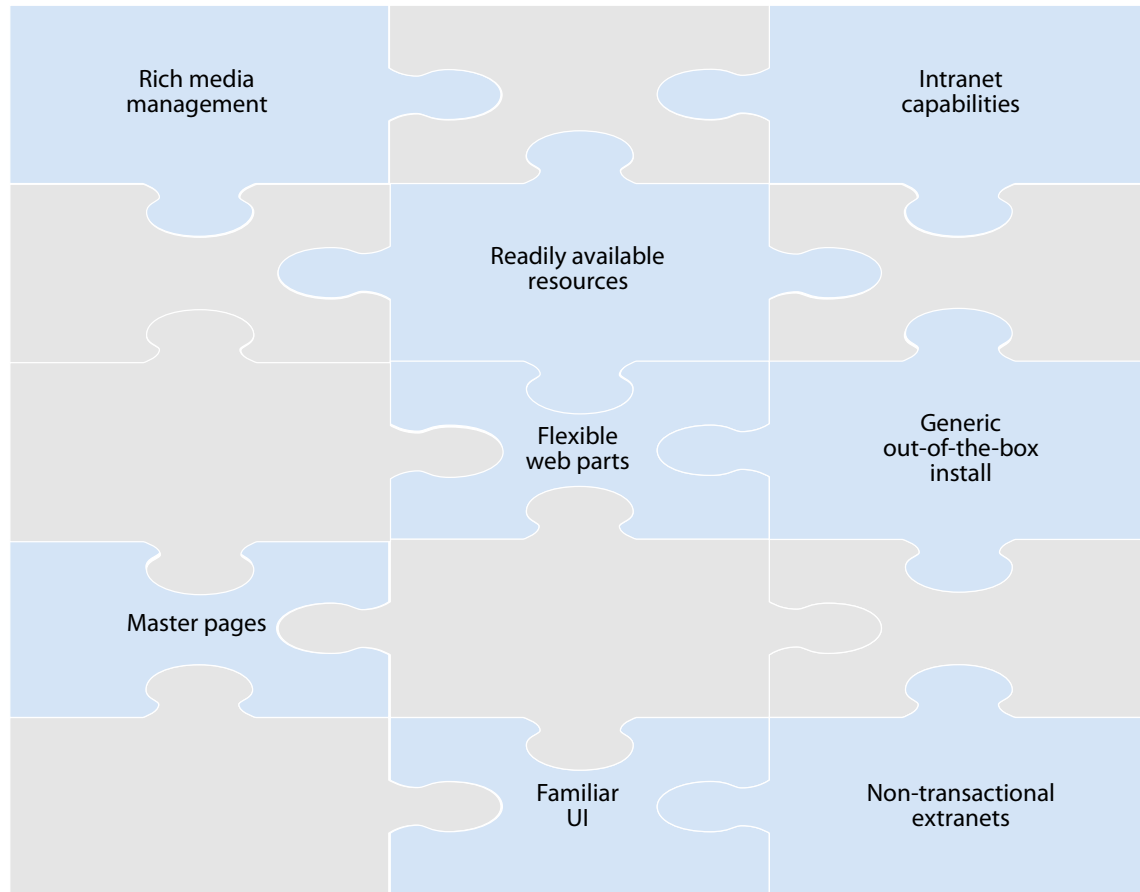
SharePoint does not compare in functionality with offerings from independent WCM vendors such as FatWire Software, Interwoven, SDL Tridion, and Vignette.<sup>3</sup> However, not all enterprises view their Web sites as essential components of their revenue streams and don't need all the functionality (and the expense and effort) that comes with higher-end WCM products. Having found success using SharePoint for other initiatives, they now consider it for external-facing Web sites.

## Limited-Functionality Internet Sites With SharePoint Are No Longer Rare

Enterprises have had some success with using SharePoint to deploy public-facing Web sites, albeit with limited persuasive content features. Those with these public-facing sites stressed that (see Figure 1):

- **Familiarity of user interfaces aids business user adoption.** First-generation WCM systems suffered from lack of user adoption, due in part to clunky and/or unfamiliar authoring and administrative tools. SharePoint has the advantage of familiar-looking user interfaces — SharePoint Designer and the Microsoft Office suite — in which to manage content, helping address many business user adoption issues.
- **Web parts prove flexible.** Several interviewees sang the praises of SharePoint’s portal-like Web parts capabilities. Said one CTO of a financial services firm, “We wanted content managers to be able to change sites without IT. Web parts really give business users the flexibility to move features around the site without IT involvement.” Another commented, “If you follow the line of thinking that WCM should be your presentation layer and expose Web parts, then SharePoint is evolving in that direction. It gives you a bunch of Legos that you can put together the way you want.”
- **Master pages enforce branding and site guidelines.** Many interviewees also praised SharePoint’s incorporation of the ASP.NET master page functionality, enabling Web site administrators to create a standard look and feel for Web pages and enforce those standards throughout the site. SharePoint includes a default master page as well as a set of sample custom master pages.
- **Out-of-the-box capabilities provide Web sites basics.** One software engineering director of a major North American retailer noted, “SharePoint has a lot of nice things out of the box, like the menu structure and look and feel. If you’re trying to do heavy customizations, things get more complex.”
- **Generic install results in quick time-to-market.** Said one consultant at a North American-based consulting firm, “Take your high-end WCM of choice. The one big advantage of SharePoint is that I can just pull it out of the box, set up content types and pages, and write my theme. I haven’t written a lick of code and I’m up and running. There is a very generic install in place that lets you do that. With some of the WCMs, it can take months just to do that.”
- **Existing Microsoft IT skills eased the decision to use SharePoint.** In many cases, companies we spoke with used SharePoint for other purposes, such as portal or document management, or ran sites with Microsoft Content Management Server (MSCMS). The ability to leverage existing Microsoft skills and infrastructure — especially in a larger IT department — can be a significant factor in the decision to use SharePoint for external Web sites.

**Figure 1** SharePoint Strengths In WCM



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Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

### Organizations Successfully Use SharePoint For Nontransactional Extranets

While SharePoint has built a reputation as a solid solution for intranet sites, many interviewees praised it as a platform for public-facing, secure extranets, and enterprises successfully use it to collaborate with partner communities and customers. SharePoint can prove an attractive solution for extranets because:

- **Organizations can get a portal and WCM in one package.** A technologist with a consulting company pointed out: “You can get a great WCM from one of the independents, but you’ll have to add in a portal framework and do integration. Then you’re dealing with two products. With SharePoint, you get it in one product, and you’re paying the same license fee with portal and WCM.”

- **Unlike other WCMs, SharePoint builds in authentication and identity management.** Some interviewees praised SharePoint's identity management when using it for extranets. Commented a practice manager: "The authentication is important, and it's built into the brains and guts of SharePoint. The identity management and permissions are already there. A lot of the pure CMS don't have a concept of that for end users, so you have to build it yourself." A systems architect with a technology manufacturer said: "It's great for security — our sites have very specific security requirements."
- **Some enterprises don't have transactional needs.** Citing scalability concerns, most enterprises interviewed avoided using SharePoint for extranets with high-volume, transactional, back-office system integration needs, indicating that those capabilities would require much customization and expertise.

### But Limitations Hamper SharePoint's Suitability For Persuasive Web Sites

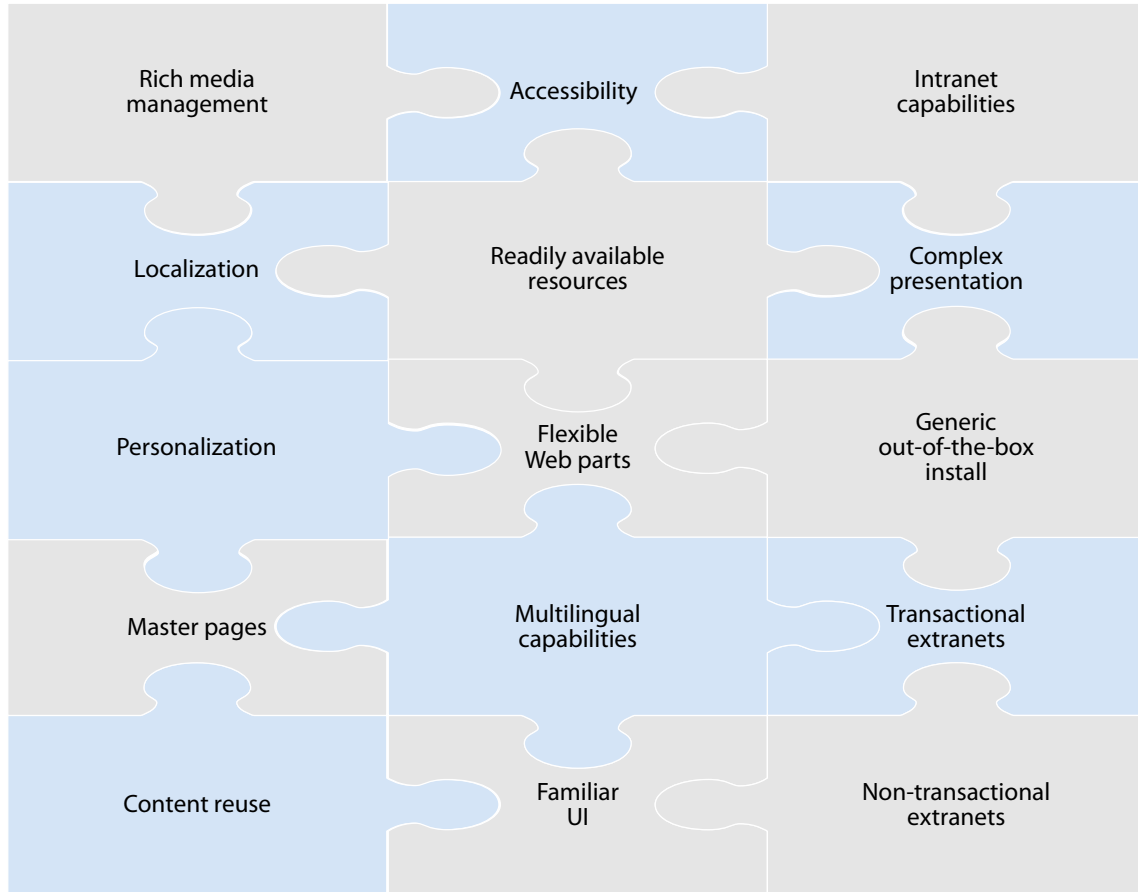
As external sites grow larger and more complex, and especially as they become persuasive content initiatives, SharePoint's limitations as a WCM solution become more evident. SharePoint does support some impressive persuasive sites for companies like Hawaiian Airlines and Ministry of Sound.<sup>4</sup> But the platform places some hurdles in the way of organizations aiming to launch and manage large, media-rich, multilingual, or persuasive sites, since (see Figure 2):

- **Content sharing and reuse proves difficult.** Separation of content from the presentation layer has been a core mantra of any WCM for about a decade. SharePoint technically does support this, but it does not separate content from directory locations, so reusing a content item in multiple sites (with different look and feel and/or URLs) requires careful planning, governance, and, probably, customization. Said a systems architect for a major retail chain: "The content between our 17 sites is 80% the same, and we want to push all the content out at once, in different skins. It should all be automatic, but it's not. I would say that this was 50% of the work effort during implementation."
- **You have to work hard to be sexy.** SharePoint's out-of-the-box templates can help get a site up quickly, but their limitations in number and features will not serve an organization that requires a distinctive look and feel. Highly customized page layouts are certainly possible — such as those Ministry of Sound developed — but care and feeding may be excessive. As a Web applications manager acknowledged, "I wouldn't use it for a site that has to look really slick." One marketing director for a technology manufacturer added, "Trying to get SharePoint to conform to our very specific presentation requirements was very hard. SharePoint has some ideas about presentation that you have to rip out in order to impose your own."
- **Support for personalization remains behind the curve.** Microsoft has finally added some personalization functionality in SharePoint 2007 — it was completely absent from Content

Management Server 2002. SharePoint's personalization support only consists of profile-based attribute matching that most leading WCM solutions have supported for years. Organizations can use it to experiment with targeting content to simple visitor segments, but will, for example, struggle to create and manage business rules that adjudicate content delivery when a visitor is a member of multiple segments.

- **Multilingual site management proves inadequate.** SharePoint's Variations feature allows site owners to create cloned versions ("variants") of a site or pages. Initially, this looks like a good way of creating and linking local language variants to a master site, and Microsoft promotes it as such. However, without true localization features — like the ability to route individual content items through translation workflows and to display "diffs" between versions of source language content — Variations doesn't meet the requirements of a global corporation. "We could see it was going to be pretty clunky and we'd have to do a lot of customization" said the chief architect for an automobile manufacturer that uses SharePoint, "so we built our own solution."<sup>5</sup>
- **Rich media impoverishes performance.** Rich media has become an increasingly important feature of persuasive sites, but it burdens SharePoint's document repository mentality. By default, SharePoint stores all content in its database. It stores media files as blobs (binary large objects), so a few large files can degrade system performance. Also, SharePoint creates versions by storing the entire item again — not just the differences — which quickly multiplies the impact of large files.
- **Accessibility issues require customization.** Several interviewees reported that creating sites that meet Web accessibility guidelines involves a significant amount of custom coding. "First off," said one agency director, "the product needs to embrace compliance around HTML and XHTML." A systems architect with a North American retailer warned, "We've had problems with accessibility in a number of areas — not only with SharePoint itself, but the ASP.NET framework as well."

**Figure 2** The Missing Pieces In A SharePoint WCM Solution



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Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

### FINDING SHAREPOINT EXPERTISE IS THE CORE CHALLENGE

Putting together a team to support SharePoint-based Web projects requires attention to some unusual dynamics. While organizations can find plenty of .NET developers in the marketplace, SharePoint has its own skill sets. Commented one CTO of a manufacturer: “The problem is when you look at it as a holistic product for an entire problem, getting people with implementation experience is a problem.” I&KM pros considering a SharePoint WCM project should remember that:

- **Experienced SharePoint developers remain in short supply.** Staffing to support any large Web initiative presents a challenge, especially those based on a WCM from one of the smaller vendors that do not have large ecosystems of developers and implementation partners. SharePoint-based projects face the inverse problem — eager developers want to learn, but the rapid spread of SharePoint makes finding experienced leaders and retaining developers difficult.

A project manager at an engineering firm noted, “In a lot of ways, [the shortage of resources] is good because it tells us that we’re ahead of the curve. On the downside, we really have to rely on ourselves, and we don’t have industry best practices to follow.”

- **Your .NET superstar may be a SharePoint shrimp.** Your IT department has worked with .NET for years, so how hard can SharePoint be? Answer: Very. An agency CTO noted, “SharePoint and .NET skills are very different. You have to know the naming conventions and the Web part framework. You have to be aware of deployment — the content publishing framework, WSP deployment and package creation, security, and the global assembly cache. You have people who are very good .NET developers, but when it comes to doing SharePoint, it really separates people out.”
- **SharePoint eats over-confident developers for breakfast.** Paradoxically, the strongest teams sometimes have the hardest time with initial SharePoint projects. “I’ve got an office full of Master of the Universe types,” said one chief architect at a global manufacturer. “They thought they could take charge of the SharePoint platform. It took these developers about three months to figure out that you have to give the platform a lot of control, and respect how it wants to work. Now we have a recipe book and can train developers in a few weeks.”
- **Hired guns save time . . . but can present headaches.** Several interviewees stressed the importance of employing a SharePoint expert for the first project. “If you don’t have someone from the infrastructure side — not a developer but someone who understands SharePoint architecture, you may struggle. That was really crucial for building a high-performance site.” But watch out for those who may be inflating their SharePoint resumes. Warned one CIO: “Our biggest problem when we say SharePoint is that everyone wants to learn it, and they’re not always transparent about their true knowledge.”
- **FrontPage experience still matters.** Rumors of the death of Microsoft Office FrontPage have been greatly exaggerated. In fact, it has been resurrected as SharePoint Designer (and the related Microsoft Expression Web). Business users who need to alter SharePoint presentation templates effectively need to learn FrontPage. “They need to get rid of the dependency on SharePoint Designer. People cringe at this; developers and business users both hate it,” said one CTO.
- **SharePoint, while easy to use, still requires user training and documentation.** Organizations often overlook documentation and training materials for WCM deployments, but they still prove necessary for SharePoint projects, despite the familiar-looking Microsoft tools.<sup>6</sup> Advised one project manager at a manufacturer: “The content authors say that it provides a lot of power and functionality and there’s a lot you can do with it. But we have to provide a lot of support to show people how to change things.”

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### DON'T DISMISS SHAREPOINT FOR PUBLIC SITES, BUT DO YOUR HOMEWORK

Organizations considering SharePoint for public-facing initiatives should not automatically embrace it simply because of intranet successes, nor should they automatically dismiss it because it's not a best-of-breed WCM. Instead, when evaluating SharePoint as a WCM for public-facing Web sites, I&KM pros should:

- **Reject peer pressure arguments of “if it works for the intranet, it will work elsewhere.”**  
There are some good reasons to consider SharePoint for your external sites, but “we practically get it for free” and “lots of people are building sites with it” don't qualify. Although some of your stakeholders who have used SharePoint successfully internally may champion it as a solution for external sites, remember that your public Web site requirements may prove very different from your intranet ones. Many companies have successfully managed two different WCMs for internal and external Web sites.
- **Make staffing plans in advance.** Post-purchase is not the time to find out that you can't hire enough developers or locate an expert consultant. Be sure to have resources who have experience with SharePoint architecture and infrastructure, rather than just application development. And beware of SharePoint novices posing as experts due to their .NET experience.
- **Figure out if you'll survive the amount of customization you need.** You can get SharePoint to do just about anything, given enough customization, but over-customization will haunt you by eating resources, exposing bugs, and making upgrades complicated. Before selecting SharePoint, determine if your site requirements will demand customizations that will crush you later. Advises one CIO: “With SharePoint, you've bought a horse. At what point are you trying to turn it into a camel?”

## SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

### Methodology

We interviewed 15 participants in three categories: user companies that have used SharePoint for external sites; user companies that considered using SharePoint or once used SharePoint and then chose a persuasive WCM vendor; and system integrators/interactive agencies that have implemented SharePoint for multiple public-facing WCM initiatives.

### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For more information on the broad functionality of SharePoint as an ECM platform, see the October 24, 2006, "[Microsoft's 2007 Collaboration Platform](#)" report, see the March 2, 2007, "[Microsoft's 2007 Enterprise Content Management Platform](#)" report, and see the April 24, 2008, "[Topic Overview: Microsoft Office SharePoint Server 2007](#)" report.
- <sup>2</sup> Forrester interviewed 30 enterprises about their WCM needs and 11 WCM vendors about how they plan to respond to those needs. See the September 28, 2007, "[The Trends Driving Web Content Management Innovation](#)" report.
- <sup>3</sup> Forrester evaluated 11 leading WCM vendors across 190 external site content management and delivery criteria. See the July 16, 2007, "[The Forrester Wave™: Web Content Management For External Sites, Q3 2007](#)" report.
- <sup>4</sup> Source: Hawaiian Air (<http://www.hawaiianair.com>) and Ministry of Sound (<http://www.ministryofsound.com>). Ministry of Sound's Hed Kandi brand (<http://www.hedkandi.com>) launched the very first public site on MOSS 2007 in August 2006.
- <sup>5</sup> Note that in addition no more than 50 variants can be created (the automobile manufacturer has many more than 50 languages on some sites).
- <sup>6</sup> Web content management (WCM) initiatives remain complex, expensive, time-consuming projects with high failure rates, and I&KM professionals should be aware of common mistakes. See the February 23, 2007, "[Five Pitfalls To Avoid In Web Content Management Implementations](#)" report.

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