

Solving the Software Puzzle

Software is fundamental to the success of every Web enterprise. Choose the right software for your business' specific needs and you will find a valued business partner.

By Peter Prestipino

Selecting software requires we answer important questions. Do you need a better way to share and distribute content? If so, your answer is a powerful, yet user-friendly content management system.

Do you need to develop a better relationship with prospects and existing customers? A customer relationship management (CRM) software solution to empower your sales and marketing staff is what you'll need.

Want to sell an exciting new gadget you designed and developed? Seek only e-commerce platforms of the highest caliber. Need others to help sell those gadgets? Affiliate management software is widely available and may even be built into your existing e-commerce solution.

Each of these types of software solutions comprise the pieces that can help solve the Web success puzzle. These platforms power our websites in the form of content management systems and weblogs, automate commerce, and enable us to communicate on a level perhaps never conceived of by the Web's founders.

Let's review the components and how they can fit to ensure the best chance of success on the Web, and look at some of the vendors who are making it happen.

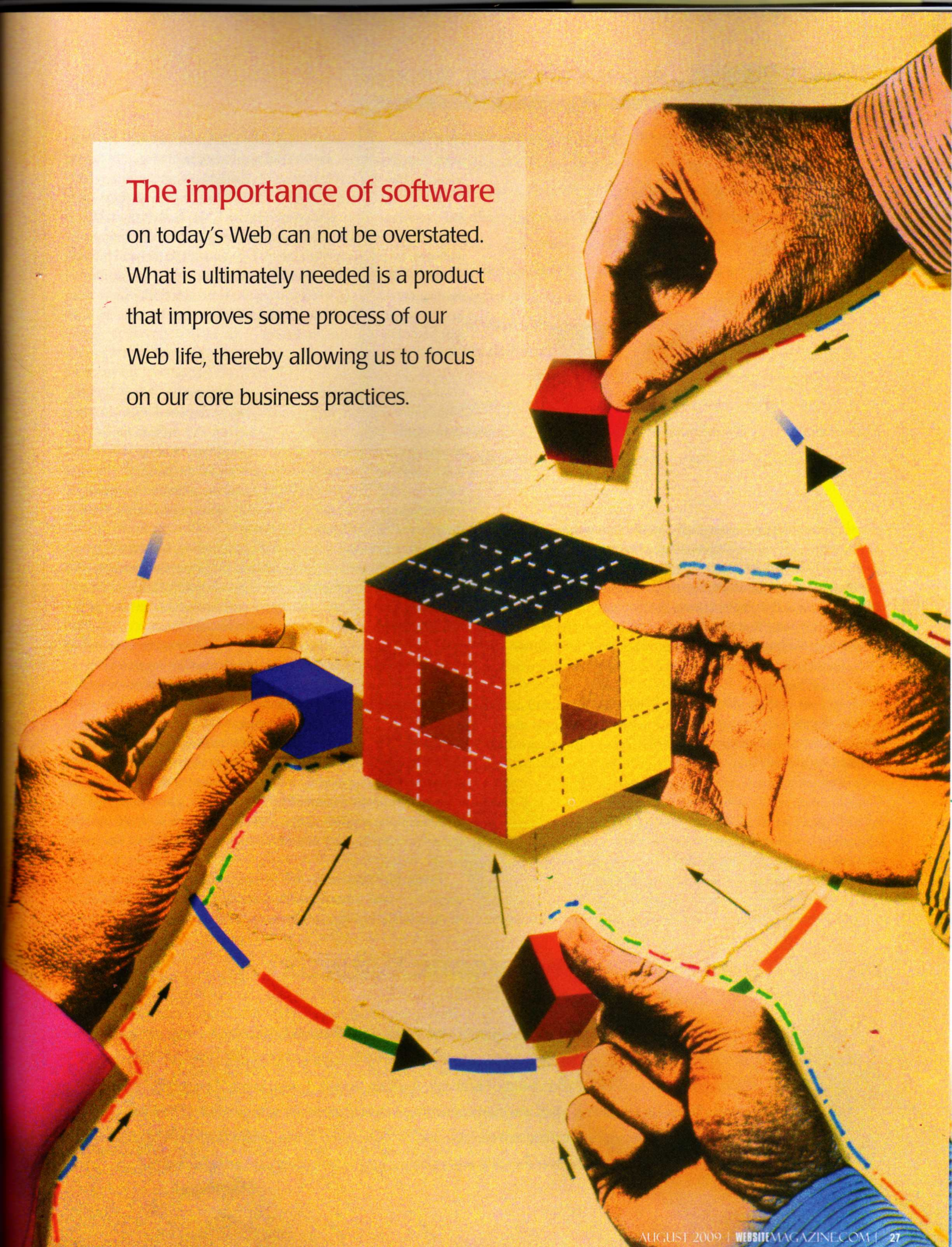
Content Management Systems

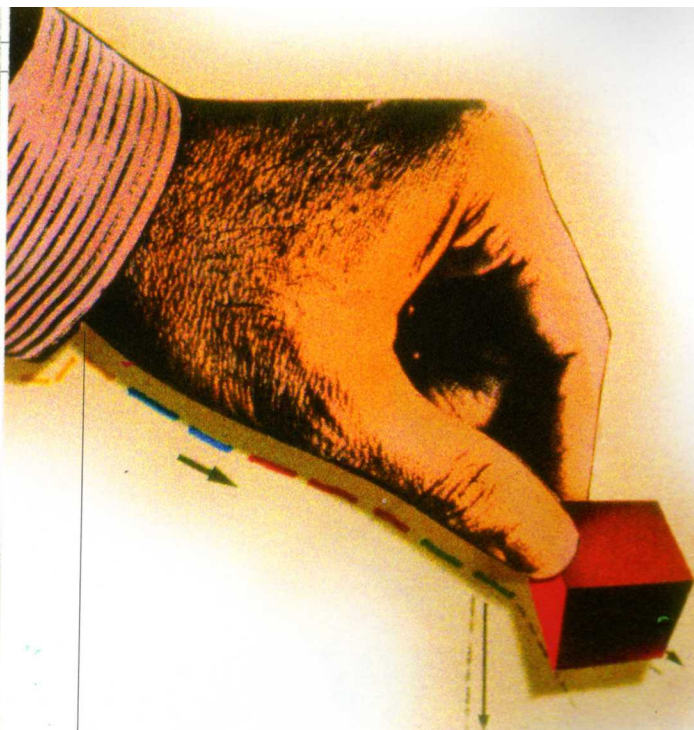
Content management systems (CMS) are software applications designed to store, manage and distribute HTML content and digital assets, and are available in a number of hybrid varieties. Most feature a system where users can deploy a default template or skin them per their own branding elements, offer editable content, are scalable with plugins (more common among open source systems) and rely on Web standards. More sophisticated systems offer workflow management, delegation and advanced document management to ensure content never exceeds its predetermined lifecycle. CMS are often more alike than they are different but often the determining factor is the scale that a website or business needs.

The major change on the Web since its commercial inception nearly two decades ago is that more people are involved in the

The importance of software

on today's Web can not be overstated. What is ultimately needed is a product that improves some process of our Web life, thereby allowing us to focus on our core business practices.





process of creating and managing content. That results in a greater number of people needing the benefits of a CMS with more options from which to choose. Understanding the features and support models of these solutions will ensure you make the right choice for your business and website. However, there are hundreds of CMS on the market, and that can be confusing to both the novice and experienced Web professional. Every website is different, so any CMS should address the business' specific needs, starting with the most critical functions.

Open source CMS like Joomla, OpenCMS, Plone and others provide the ability to easily edit and maintain a dynamic assemblage of documents and data. In addition, these solutions are often bundled with portal and community features that make the free price twice as nice. Another popular open source choice is Drupal — well known as a scalable open source CMS and used by some rather large websites, including parody news site TheOnion.com. Ultimately, however, the size of deployments remains a challenge with any open source CMS. In short, the prevailing opinion is that they often don't grow well with your business.

The middle ground between open source solutions and full-scale enterprise-ready platforms is filling up quickly with commercial

open-source solutions (that typically charge for support) like WebGui from Plain Black, DotNetNuke, ezPublish and Magnolia, hosted solutions like Clickability, and mid-market vendors like Sitecore.

At the upper end of CMS are full-blown enterprise-level solutions — often referred to as Enterprise CMS, or ECMS — necessary for many businesses running complex, resource-intensive websites. Interwoven, Vignette's V7, or Oracle's Stellent all provide an entire software infrastructure to manage digital assets. One of the biggest advantages of ECMS is these vendors offer more than just a support mechanism for the software; they become an integral part of your overall business.

Weblog Software: Still on the Edge

Over time, blogging moved from an edgy, mostly American phenomenon to a global, main-stream activity responsible for the lion's share of the Web's content — more than 133 million blogs were tracked by Technorati in 2008. The presence of blogs is apparent if not pervasive on search results and social media sites. The similarity to CMS (often a substitute) and the potential to influence conversations with consumers makes selecting weblog software, therefore, a critical business decision.

Weblog software is essentially designed to facilitate the creation, maintenance and syndication of blogs and their content. No matter the individual solution, features always include support for authoring, editing and publishing content entries, as well as the ability to easily create or edit titles and permalinks (URL structure) and post dates. Also commonly included is the presence of comment support, and categories or tags, and the support of trackbacks or pingbacks. These are the most basic, yet most important features of any weblog installation.

More advanced features include Web syndication (offered through RSS or Atom) capabilities, post moderation and even posting APIs, which can enable blogging from mobile devices via SMS or e-mail. Blogging directly from any number of third-party applications should also be available. For example, some blogging software solutions support plugins for Firefox, such as Scribefire that allows the user to post directly to their own blog from anywhere on the Web.

Much like other software, weblogs come in two varieties — open source and commercial/proprietary. There are hundreds of developer-hosted blogging platforms (e.g. blogger.com, LiveJour-

DISTRIBUTED SOCIAL ACTIVITY AGGREGATOR: AMPLIFEEDER

Lifestreaming platform Amplifeeder has caught the attention of the Web's elite. The solution is unique, in that its backend was developed in ASP.NET, unlike popular solutions such as SweetCron (PHP). Users of the aggregator platform can combine their activity from different services (Flickr, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Google Shared Items, Tumblr, Digg, Reddit, LastFM, Stumbleupon, Delicious, Upcoming, Mixx and many others) and style the themes as they see fit. There are actually quite a few impressive themes already, something that can't be said for SweetCron. While using a lifestreaming app like Amplifeeder or SweetCron will not appeal to everyone, it is an interesting way to broadcast your social activity.

