Geek **Speak**   Lee Drake

Reducing the TCO of Your Website

Now that the Web is an established fact in our day-to-day business life, and many companies have had their sites for a few years, companies are beginning to look at redesigning or redeploying their sites. Sometimes sites designed a few years ago are becoming dated, or the company's vision has drifted from where it was when the site was created, or perhaps their image and logo have undergone a design change. In other cases, companies forget that keeping a site "evergreen" with new and interesting information makes the site more valuable for today's Web users. In any case, their site is ready for a major facelift—and then comes reality. They find that it's going to cost the same or more to re-deploy their site with its new look as it did when they first designed it.

Furthermore, companies that paid large dollars for a site find that something as simple as adding some new content or another section to their site involves expensive changes throughout their site, or an inordinate amount of expense.

So what can be done to reduce the TCO or Total Cost of Ownership of our Websites? One solution is to make an effort to physically separate content from design. When you think about it, most of the work that your company puts into a Website is coming up with the content to post to it. Yet, when the site is redesigned, this content frequently has to be put in again, or in many cases completely recreated.

In a site with excellent architecture, the content and the presentation of that content are in separate layers. If parts of the site change frequently you may even want to have an interface that allows you to change the content of the site instantly—adding new news stories, press releases or contacts to the contact list are areas where these items might be considered. For instance, performing changes such as updating an online catalog, maintaining customer lists, or working with an online calendar are other areas where content list management may significantly reduce site costs.

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Another way to reduce TCO is to keep your design requirements simple and straightforward. This also has the advantage of making your site work on more browser platforms, be easier to navigate and understand, and faster to load. While everyone wants their site to be attractive, users want your site to deliver the information to them that they need or want in an easy to use fashion. In addition, graphics changes are expensive while text and content changes are cheap. By reducing the number of graphical elements we're automatically making the site easier to redeploy or modify.

Finally, it's important that you have a way to roll a site back or forward. If you make a mistake in your content, or you deploy something only to find that your users don't like it, you should be able to easily roll back all or parts of a site to an earlier version. A properly designed content-managed site keeps versions and milestones so that your site can be moved back to an earlier version, or so that a new feature can be rolled out without necessarily affecting the entire site.

One type of technology Web companies of today are employing is to store the content of sites in XML data forms, and then using XSL and XSLT to translate that

and lay it out on the Web page for the user. Sites using this technology typically have a lower cost of ownership because changes can be made to the underlying XML documents. In addition, new versions of Microsoft office will soon be saving all their data in XML format, making it easier to integrate content from other sources into your existing Website.

So, if you're considering a major facelift, or paying constantly for updates and changes—ask your developer if they have a method for separating content from design. Ask them if they can help you design pages so you can maintain them yourself, without knowing HTML, understanding FTP or using a Web development tool. Ask them what their strategy is for deploying content management and XML. If they can't help you with these issues it might be time to look for a Web engineer who can concentrate not only on the design of your site but on the long term cost of ownership, and the ease of updating it.   **BSM**

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