



Published: 8/25/2008

## **Open source CMS: What you really need to know**

By Michael Sebastian

[michaels@ragan.com](mailto:michaels@ragan.com)

*Selecting a content management system for your intranet or Web site? Read this first*

So you're in the market for a content management system (CMS)—the system powering your Web site or intranet—and IT suggests open source software.

Unlike enterprise software, like Microsoft SharePoint, open source is free and downloadable on the Web. It is called open source, because programmers can open the software's backend and make changes to it.

Open source might appear attractive to your company's programmers and, indeed, it might be the right choice for your portal or Web site—or maybe not.

"[Open source] is really empowering," said technology consultant Peat Bakke. "It gives [an IT department] the ability to make the changes it wants to make; you don't have to go to an outside person to make the changes you want."

MyRagan members are discussing open source CMS. Take a peek. [Weigh in.](#)

At the same time, most open source software is written by programmers for programmers; that often leaves communicators, the ones with limited backend experience, scratching their heads while the power to post remains in IT's hands.

So, to help enable you, here are four open source CMS options and what you need to know about each one.

**[Wordpress](#)**. You've heard a lot about this one, and usually it refers to blogging platforms. Turns out Wordpress is also good for building Web sites. It is also widely considered the most user-friendly open source CMS.

"[Wordpress is] probably the easiest to install [and] easiest to get up and running," explained technology consultant and blogger Shel Holtz.

However, there are setbacks. Wordpress is less robust than other systems, so it might work poorly for a large Web site. Also, just because it's easy to install and download doesn't mean the entire process will be a breeze. Someone familiar with programming should likely be involved in the setup.

As for templates—the actual Web pages—there are numerous pre-fabricated ones on the

Web. If you want pages with a company logo or other custom design, then you'll need someone with knowledge of design.

Good news is that once everything's set, posting actual content to the site is quite easy.

**Bottom line:** A great CMS if you're building a small Web site. Steer clear if your intranet or Web site will be carrying loads of information. You will likely need instruction to master it.

**Quick tip:** New to Wordpress and need help figuring it out? Buy [Wordpress for Dummies](#), by Lisa Sabin-Wilson. Been using Wordpress for a while and want fresh ideas on its applications? Buy *Wordpress for Dummies*.

**Joomla** is an award-winning and popular open source CMS that's been around since 2005 (after splitting from Mambo, another option for open source CMS).

Its download rates are exceptionally high and the community of Joomla users is large and robust. There are more than 1.3 million posts on the official Joomla forum. That's very helpful, because the forum is where users submit questions. Call it an evolving online user's manual.

Unlike Wordpress, Joomla will power a large intranet or Web site. The possible applications for Joomla are endless, from hosting and storing articles to social media to search engine optimization tools and virtual stores.

Joomla has its share of problems. A recent version, Joomla 1.5, was met with stiff criticism, while older versions experienced security lapses. Another chief complaint, for non-programmers, is the difficulty of Joomla. Its size and countless functions make it less user-friendly than Wordpress. Training is definitely required.

**Bottom line:** Very popular CMS with a host of possibilities for your intranet or Web site. Installing and using it will require help from IT.

**Quick tip:** If you go with Joomla, pick up the book [Beginning Joomla](#). It not only walks you through the software but also addresses complex subjects in plain English.

**Drupal** is the "800-pound gorilla in the open source community," Holtz said. "It's a big deal." *CMS Wire* said Drupal is downloaded more than 100,000 times a month. Part of the Walt Disney Company's intranet is

#### A site you need to know about

In the market for an open source CMS? Then before you download visit [OpenSourceCMS.com](#). This site lets you test drive countless content management systems. That means you visit the site, pick a CMS and give it a test drive. You can even upload files to see how they will appear on the front end and learn what it takes to get them there. Every two hours the site dumps whatever content people have uploaded to it.

#### A closed-source option

If you're willing to spend a few bucks on a CMS—\$250,

powered by Drupal. It is also widely used by companies in the music industry.

Like Joomla, Drupal offers numerous social media options—blogs, forums, communities—plus the ability to post articles and much more; like Joomla, it is less user-friendly for non-programmers than Wordpress.

“Drupal is a very, very powerful system,” Holtz said. “But intuitive for someone who’s installing something and just wants to get up and running? No.”

**Bottom line:** Has everything you need for an intranet or Web site, but IT will be involved and you will need training.

**Quick tip:** For Web pages that look customized but can be easily purchased and installed, check out [TopNotchThemes](#). It is an online store that sells pre-fabricated templates for Drupal sites. The templates download in seconds and look custom made, said *CMS Wire*.

[DotNetNuke](#) mirrors Drupal and Joomla in options. The CMS is good for intranets and Web sites; it hosts and stores articles, allows for social media, e-commerce, etc. It’s also very popular, having registered more than 4 million downloads.

Again, like Drupal and Joomla, it will not be intuitive for someone with little programming experiencing.

There is one major distinction for DotNetNuke. The software it runs on is .Net-based. Joomla and Drupal are both PHP-based. This means Joomla and Drupal will run on operating systems Linux and Windows (with perhaps some subtle tweaking for Windows). An operating system, by the way, hosts and runs your computer’s programs.

Since it is .Net-based, DotNetNuke is 100 percent geared toward Windows. “So, if a company’s IT infrastructure is Windows-based, then the very strong recommendation is DotNetNuke,” Bakke advised. “If they’re Linux-based, then Joomla and Drupal should do the job.”

**Bottom line:** What Bakke said. If you’re operating system is Windows then consider DotNetNuke, otherwise narrow your choices to Joomla and Droopla.

**Quick tip:** If you’re a DNN newbie check out blog, [MY DNN Tips for Newbie](#).

**One final tip:** If you don’t have experience designing pages, then don’t think you will download an open source CMS and simply start creating customized templates. You can’t

actually—tech guru Shel Holtz recommends [Expression Engine](#). “You can create multiple sites with it, with different capabilities, and it’s very flexible with the designs and templates,” he explained. “[It] integrates very nicely. It’s also very scalable, [allowing for] thousands and thousands of articles.” It will likely require help from a designer or programmer, but after a little training someone with limited backend experience should be able to operate it.

do it alone. It will require help from a Web designer.