

The IT Guy

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The IT Guy

Over the course of my ten years in business development for Newfangled I have seen some excellent potential projects bite the dust based solely on a negative response from someone in the prospect's IT department. This is particularly frustrating when said technologist was not even part of the sales conversation. If we could only have discovered technological objections earlier, we could have provided answers or re-evaluated the needs and saved everyone involved from wasting their time. Some technology hurdles are objective - such as requiring Microsoft based technology. Other hurdles are subjective - such as how an IT professional feels about a particular vendor.

Because a sale is won largely on the basis of trust, establishing trust with the IT professional is crucial. This is much easier said than done. It's the IT department's job to protect the company from bad technological investments that could end up costing a whole lot more than the price tag of a proposed project. So they are rightfully suspicious and critical of outside technologies for which they are ultimately responsible.

This month's newsletter addresses to the concerns of the IT guy (or IT gal - but IT Guy rhymes so I'm going with it) that agencies that broker web development projects must answer to. Hopefully this newsletter can help build trust with the IT guy.

Overcome the IT barrier through communication

If you've ever read the comic strip "Dilbert" and laughed out loud, it's probably because it hit so close to home. The comic may be hyperbolic, but it is based in real world corporate culture. The comic's namesake, Dilbert, is admittedly nerdy. Nevertheless, he is the comic's hero. We sympathize with his plight. IT professionals the world over have pinned their favorite Dilbert comics to their cubicle walls. I do not envy them in their role, though I greatly respect what they must do. Hopefully, your company has a Dilbert who, though constantly frustrated, never loses his hope that someday, someone in management will actually make a good technological decision based on their professional advice. Fortunately, most IT professionals I've met have not given up the fight. They have not completely surrendered to cynicism like Dilbert's co-worker Wally.

Now here's the thing that you (the advertising agency), your client contact (the marketing director), and me (the outside consultant/vendor) must face up to. We sit in the chair of the guy with pointy hair. I don't like it, but whenever I am introduced to the "IT guys" in a new business meeting, what hair I have left magically grows three or four inches straight up over my ears. I swear I can see it in their eyes. They're not looking at my eyes when I talk. Their gaze is directed slightly upward at those two tufts of pointy hair above my head. I'm not sure if they're hearing what I'm saying at all or if it just sounds like, "blah, blah, blah, open source...", "blah, blah, blah, proprietary...", "blah, blah, blah, hosting fee." I can see their exasperation grow while the ad guy (you) and the marketing guy (your client) smile and nod ignorantly as they buy into my schpiel. Meanwhile, the IT guys build their list of objections to our software, criticisms of our hosting platform or disapproval of our choice of technology.

Can't we all just get along?

Dilbert reflects reality. There is a huge mote between marketing and technology and it is swimming with the sharks of mistrust. Nevertheless, our newfangled technological world forces marketing and technology to work together for better or for worse. This means that from time to time the IT guys must raise the portico, lower the drawbridge and allow foreigners into the corporate castle. While I'm never comfortable standing in the place of the suspect, I would suggest that the first stage in getting along is to respect the fact that precautions are wise and necessary. Therefore, we should willingly submit to scrutiny to overcome initial distrust and to begin productive communication to determine, based on actual needs analysis, whether or not a particular technical solution is a good fit.

Managing Multiple Websites

Clarifying some terms, which website are we talking about?

When we begin to examine the needs of a company's website, we have to be clear about which facet of a website we're talking about. In reality, most company "websites" are actually a collection of separate websites that share a common look and feel. For example, a company might have a public website, an intranet and a vendor extranet. Each of these may themselves consist of sub websites. For example, a banking site will inevitably have a public site and an online banking site where customers make their online transactions. While the two sites are, in a sense, one site (from the user's perspective), they are actually two entirely different sites built and maintained by different companies and hosted on different servers. The same could be said of an intranet that utilizes an external web-based application within the HR section for employees to access their benefits information. Lumping these sites all together under the term "website" causes a great deal of miscommunication between IT and marketing departments, because the term fails to distinguish them.

If we can limit our primary communication to the public website, I would suggest that while the IT guy should always help evaluate a technology choice, the needs analysis pertaining to such a choice should be weighted far more heavily to the day-to-day marketing goals and objectives of the site as opposed to other behind-the-scenes technology requirements. If we can limit a conversation to this aspect of a company's website I would boldly venture to say that our particular technology, process, capabilities, terms, and hosting environment, should have no problem whatsoever passing muster with an IT professional.

Evaluating Website Content Management Systems

Audience shift

The remainder of this newsletter is written for the IT professional as an overview of our technology process and approach. Hopefully, we can answer some broad stroke questions to facilitate IT evaluation and work toward positive, trust-establishing communication with IT professionals.

In which cases would we not pass IT muster?

One of the great things about IT guys is that they're so impatient. They cannot endure waste, and they despise inefficiency. So, in order to not waste one very important resource (the IT guy's time), let me begin by quickly acknowledging a couple conditions that would not be a good fit for Newfangled's technology and approach.

Microsoft's IIS Web Server - Newfangled has deliberately chosen [open source tools](#) (the LAMP suite; Linux, Apache, MySQL, and PHP). While we are very happy with our choice, we recognize that every technology has pluses and minuses, and technology choice is less important than a developer's skill in using the technology they've chosen. While our software is cross platform (I run my demos on a Windows laptop running XP), as far as our production hosting is concerned, we've limited our sphere to Linux/Apache. We typically provide high-end application hosting through our hosting partner RackSpace. However, if a site is to be hosted on a dedicated in-house server, we only support Linux/Apache. Window/IIS does work, but in order to keep from spreading ourselves too thin, we do not provide hosting support for anything but Linux/Apache. We've provided further detail of our hosting specifications in the FAQ section below.

Real time integration with internal client databases - Newfangled takes a very conservative and cautious position when real time integration with client databases is required. There are extremely important security issues when our web server and an in-house database must communicate across the internet. Additionally, the complexities involved in moving data between our database and an unfamiliar database calls for careful case-by-case consideration. We are more inclined to pursue batch data importing and exporting solutions rather than real time automated data transfer. That being said we do make exceptions, but by-and-large we steer away from such requirements.

Technical FAQs

Before I provide basic answers to a handful of technical FAQs I would like to highlight one frequently asked question from the IT guy. I am going to spend most of the remainder of this newsletter on this question because it underscores Newfangled's unusual web development philosophy and technological approach.

Problems with In-House Website Development

FAQs

Question #1: "Can I modify the site templates/code myself?" - As with most CMS systems (Content Management Systems), the NewfangledCMS allows all of the content of a website to be easily updated by non-technical administrators. Unlike most CMS providers, Newfangled is NOT in the business of selling CMS software to companies so that they can build their own websites with it. We are in the business of building websites for our clients. We believe that CMS should be provided free of charge for every website, not just for those that can pony up tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars for CMS/database software licenses. That's why we give absolutely free **user licenses** to every client, large or small. Many people wonder whether or not we provide and support a **developer license** - so that a company's IT department can develop with the system after we've built the initial site.

Answer: If you really want it, yes, we will provide a developer license. But please read the following explanation, because in the end most of our clients realize they don't really want or need one.

Explanation: The structural design and the functional construction of a website are the work of a web designer/developer. Newfangled acts as the NewfangledCMS developer for clients. We provide not only the technology for the website, but also the experience, consultation, design and expertise for the entire project. For clients without an IT department, this is a perfect arrangement. For clients who have IT professionals with development skills on staff, this arrangement begs the question of whether or not they will be able to further develop the site after it is done. Typically, the answer to this question is no. We don't usually provide developer licenses and support. However, if our client really wants to be able to work on the site, we will provide a developer license. But before you ask for this kind of arrangement, let me re-state the question to highlight a subtle difference in motive. The question could be asked, "**I want to** be able to **work on the site myself**. Or it could be asked, "**I want to be able to** work on the site myself. Our answer differs depending on the way the client emphasizes the question. In the first case, the client asks the question because the IT staff really wants and intends to build the site themselves. In the second instance, the question is whether or not the IT staff would be **able** to work on the site themselves should the need arise.

We are much more sympathetic and open to supporting to the second question. An IT professional is responsible for evaluating technology, and their recommendations often form the basis for final decisions. If they greenlight our services and the site is a dud (which would never happen!), they would have to answer all the complaints. Nobody wants to find themselves in a situation where they are held accountable for problems they have no capacity to fix. This is scary. I don't blame any IT professional for shrinking away from such situations. That's also why we answer "yes" to the question of developer licensing when it is asked this way. However, we expect to do a fantastic job, to create a site that meets all expectations and to provide prompt, professional and reasonably priced services. In this case, the developer license is a safety net, and if we fail in any of these ways (which we won't), the IT guy can access the site to take care of the problem. Since we only have a couple of clients with developer licenses, we arrange the costs and support terms of such licenses on a case-by-case basis.

The first way the question can be asked, "I want to... work on the site myself," is less of a fit for Newfangled. Sometimes an IT department wants to build the site themselves. Web development can be fun...if it wasn't, I wouldn't be doing it! I can understand why an IT department would want to be design and develop the company website. They might feel burned by the hiring of an outside development firm to do the job. The appeal of building a website and the desire to protect the company from bad technology or a difficult vendor leads many IT departments to keep the site in-house. Although the motive for keeping the site development in-house is understandable, the end result is not usually very desirable. It's better to fully scrutinize an outside firm (like mine!) and to develop a positive working relationship. Web development is an intricate mix of technology and design. Most IT departments, while there are exceptions, aren't known for design skill. As a web development company we provide a balance of diverse skills.

Once a site is done, most IT professionals I know are not eager to have the marketing, HR, customer service, sales and other departments knocking on their door for website help or requests for adjustments and new features. Our door is always open, and we continually and proactively invent new ways for marketing departments to use the web more effectively.

To get solid CMS capability, an IT department must either spend a lot of money on software licenses or build a home-grown CMS. While the idea of building their own software may be appealing to the IT professional, unless it is their main job, they are not likely to reproduce most of the capabilities available in existing CMS systems. We've been building ours since 2000.

Assuming that at the end of the day the costs for outsourcing are less than internal development, it's much more efficient to let experienced

developers who deal with one system day in and day out handle site development, so that busy IT staff can focus on the many tasks associated with their primary areas of responsibility.

Content Management FAQ

Other technical FAQs

Question #2: What is the NewfangledCMS built in?

Answer: The NewfangledCMS has been in development since 2000 and is built with PHP and MySQL. We use Zend optimizer and Zend compiler to improve performance. NewfangledCMS sites consist of stand-alone PHP templates (like for a home page), multi-page PHP templates (for press releases or products) and CSS files for content display. NewfangledCMS sites also include client-entered data stored in the MySQL database, existing [NewfangledCMS applications](#) (built to extend the functionality of a NewfangledCMS site) and a site-specific components file written in PHP for custom site functions...

Question #3: What does the NewfangledCMS actually give us control of?

Answer: The basic user license gives our clients control over all content on every page of their website. This typically includes the body text, headlines, sub heads, default images with their captions, inset images and document attachments. Clients can also access a content formatter to make simple text formatting changes (bold, italic, lists, etc.). The formatter also has a built-in link generator for creating internal and external links. Images can be uploaded in gif or jpeg format at any size and scaled in the formatter, however we highly recommend formatting all images to the desired size before uploading. Intentionally, we do not provide text font, color or size formatting options because they are handled globally through the CSS.

Question #4: What are the specs for your hosting?

Answer: RackSpace is our premiere managed hosting provider. They have an outstanding network infrastructure that boasts 100% uptime, four years running. We host on a Linux platform using Apache. We have one main production server with an exact standby server that mirrors all content in case of hardware failure. Both servers reside behind a firewall. The server has dual AMD Athlon MP 2600+ 2.133 GHz processors, 3 GB of RAM and a SCSI RAID array of three drives with over 100GB of storage. RackSpace runs daily differential backups and weekly full directory backups. We provide Urchin 5 stats reports, which compile nightly for every site. Email, if needed, is provided via our Noteworthy, Rackspace's specialized email service.

Question #5: Can we host a NewfangledCMS site in house?

Answer: Yes. Server requirements: Dedicated Linux/Apache server, Pentium 4 - 2ghz, 1gb RAM, 50GB Hard Drive, Linux (RedHat Enterprise Linux AS suggested), MySQL 4.0.20, PHP 4.3.6, Zend Optimizer 2.5.1. There is a one-time setup charge for in-house hosting. We still charge a monthly fee for NewfangledCMS application technical support, and we charge for additional ongoing server technical support.

Question #6: Can we integrate with WhateverBase?

Answer: We generally avoid real time integration with secondary databases. However, depending on the database and its web support, we do make exceptions. Such instances are determined on a case-by-case basis.

Question #7: What if Newfangled goes under?

Answer: Our favorite FAQ! Alas, it must be asked. Our contractual terms and conditions state that if Newfangled were to go belly up (I think we use more professional terminology in our actual contract), we will provide uncompiled NewfangledCMS source code to each Newfangled client for the maintenance of their existing website. Because we've used PHP and MySQL as our development environment, in the unlikely scenario that Newfangled goes under, finding an alternate developer should be easy enough. For the sake of comfort, it may help you to know that we have been in business since 1995 and are privately owned...not driven by venture capital investors.

More questions?

There are many questions that need to be answered when it comes to examining the suitability of a particular website technology. Hopefully, this newsletter has provided enough broad answers to most technical questions. We can engage in further dialogue about our system for any particular project. Feel free to contact us if you have other questions or if you'd like us to get more specific about anything we've already covered. But in closing, I'd like to suggest one other important aspect of building confidence when picking a developer: track record. Hearing from existing clients can be extremely helpful in determining whether our process, capabilities and approach are suitable for your website. We've posted many testimonials on our website, and our proposals contain contact information for many more clients.