

Do you need an automated Online Business?

In the last few years the internet has seen an increase in the range of sites driven by content supplied from various sources. Remote use of the web has given lots of opportunities for organisations to increase their productivity in less amount of time.

Linking websites to internal and external computer systems has allowed organizations to communicate faster and has guaranteed that their data is always up to date.

Some basic web-enabled database driven functions include: customer enquiries, inventory enquiries, product and service information, quantities of available products from suppliers, product catalogues, automated ordering and purchasing, automated report generation eg of accounts, monthly sales etc and shipment tracking.

Some other advanced web-enabled applications include: online surveys/questionnaires, discussion boards, forums, employee directories, online document management systems, customised email marketing tools, event calendars, newsletters, customer feedback forms, project tracking, managing website content and generating website usage statistics.

What do you need to get started?

In order to be able to implement any of the abovementioned online functions, the first thing you need to have is a database. A database simply provides you, the website owner, with a simple and effective way of organising much of the information you need to run your business. The abovementioned functions allow you to coordinate and interact all of these sources of information online.

Why integrate your database into your website?

Your database combined with a professional easy to use user interface, such as a Content Management System (CMS) or any other web application mentioned above, means that you can have unlimited opportunities to extend your business, and to more effectively manage and integrate all sources of information. You can have better and faster interaction with your customers, freeing you to invest your time in developing other new strategies for your business.

Integrating your information online means that all your business network are able to interact and conduct business from anywhere, without the need to install software for each computer user or fax information. It also means that information about your business is constantly up to date and at any time you can get an idea of how your business is performing.

Conducting business online is made secure by implementing a multi-layer secure-access system. Depending on the nature of your business, secure systems can be developed: from simple systems for small businesses to those used by banks and other large or sensitive institutions.

The following are some of the most common and popular types of web applications:

Content Management Systems (CMS)

Traditionally when you wanted to change the content of your website, each small change on each page would have to be done with time-consuming coding language. However, now, a database combined with a user interface, such as a Content Management System (CMS), means you don't have to use any code to quickly and professionally make changes to your website. The CMS simply looks like a windows-based application which interacts with the database to very easily change, monitor or update your website. For example, you can easily update your website content – adding product photos, updating price lists, changing colours – without using any code at all!

Separating the content from the site's presentation using a database allows you to easily display the same content using different web page designs. Templates allow you to change the appearance of an entire site in minutes, whilst not altering the content. The template can include the colours, headings, links, styles, graphics or blocks of text that feature on every page (or a subset of pages) on your website. If you need to change any of these, you can update one file which will change all the pages of your website instantly. On traditional static sites this same process would be very time-consuming, with each page having to be individually updated with the same changes. These types of solutions require a little more work at the outset, but will save you considerable time and money in the medium to long term. You can even organise for your website to automatically display new content at specific times.

In addition, the database allows for user interaction with your website. It allows the user to search your website content by keyword, title, author, topic or date, as these functions are also handled by the database software. Without a database, this type of user navigation of a website is not possible.

Sites that have online shops or shopping carts constantly update their pricing information, specials, promotions products and services information. Other businesses may wish to update news or information on a regular basis. In either of these cases, it's not very convenient or efficient for one employee to spend most of their time updating a Web page or indeed paying an IT consultant to update content on a daily basis. So in this situation it makes sense to automate some of these processes by using a CMS.

Many sites can also provide mechanisms for visitors to engage in discussions about topics that are related to the site's subject. This feedback can take many forms - user forums or discussion boards, feedback forms and invitations for 'comments' or 'reviews'.

This type of interaction can improve the visitor experience, engage users in the site, and generate commitment – as people feel like they are part of your website 'community'. Importantly, this also allows the website owner to garner extensive feedback about their products, industry and user preferences all for free!

Email Marketing & Customer Relationship Management

By using a database driven website, you can slowly build information about your customers, including purchasing habits, contact details, interests etc. The database can be updated automatically whenever your clients interact with your website, saving considerable time in compiling and updating lists manually. And of course these lists can provide an efficient way to interact with your customers. For example, you can tailor different **email marketing packages** and send them to different customers who can be already grouped automatically according to their interests. E-bulletins or newsletters can be sent out to organisational members who chose to subscribe to certain categories/interest areas via your website...the options are endless!

Statistics on Website Usage

It is very important to have an understanding of your website traffic or visitor activity. This involves baseline information including the number of visitors during specific time periods, originating location of a visitor (domain), which pages are visited most, which keywords were used to search for your site and how long visitors stay in specific sections or on particular pages.

It is critical to have the ability to analyse web traffic (visitors) and patterns, and then integrate this knowledge into the overall management of your business. For example:

- Which goods and services are people buying online?
- Which information are people most interested?
- Which marketing strategies are most effective in a specific period of time?

Online shopping

Online purchasing of products is growing exponentially around the world. Many small to medium businesses with static websites are now rapidly following the lead of 'big business' in conducting a key form of 'e-commerce' - buying and selling online.

Online transactions can involve shopping carts, online auctions, secure credit card processing and encryption of sensitive data. Updating online price lists can be done with the abovementioned CMS, and then ordering supplies or generating monthly sales reports can all be coordinated from the one database.

In brief...

- A database-driven website **saves on maintenance costs and time** without the need for IT specialists
- When hosted on fast servers, the database gives your site's users a **fast loading** html page, instead of frustrating waits for pages to be generated and downloaded.
- A database allows **customers / members to interact** with your site in a more flexible way.
- A database allows your **staff/suppliers** to send and receive up to date information about customers and products from anywhere, without the need for software installed at every site.
- Information recorded in a database, such as **product prices**, can be replicated all over your website but have **one single point of maintenance** (rather than updating each page separately as with traditional coding).
- A database allows you to **re-package** and **re-use website content within different templates** to present users with a regular **fresh new look**.
- A database allows you to have a better **understanding of your customers** and their needs.
- A database allows you to integrate processes such as **buying and selling** products, **ordering** supplies, **managing** your unique **customer database**, **email marketing** or **newsletter distribution** and generation of **website statistics**.

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