

A New Way of Thinking: Innovative Web-Based CMS Focuses on People

By Nancy Armstrong

Congregation management software (CMS) has been around for many years, but there's a revolution going on these days in this segment of the faith-based technology market.

Innovative software developers are encouraging congregations to think in new ways about how they connect with and use information about people. "Why not invest in a system that enables the church to capitalize on the power of the personal invitation?" says a tag line from the promotional materials of Fellowship Technologies, one such developer. Self-labeled as a "people care" system, not just a database, Fellowship One software is an example of a SAAS, or Software As A Service, which is an entirely web-based data and contact management system. The SAAS products focus on managing the process from a person's first contact with a congregation to (hopefully) becoming a fully-integrated, spiritually-maturing member. The best examples of SAAS offer a high degree of integration to the congregation's website, a flexible approach in modeling the congregation's assimilation process, and a wide variety of standard features needed by every good CMS. The creators of Fellowship One and other SAAS products believe their software is the right product for the right time. But is it right for your congregation? Here are some things to consider.

Match for congregational culture

Each congregation management software product has a distinct 'personality', and one of the most important determinations that a congregation needs to make is whether the software they're considering is a good personality match for their congregational culture.

Here's an example in the traditional CMS world: Congregation A relies on the gifts and generosity of its members without the formality of pledges or assigned numbered offering envelopes. They like CMS Product BB, but find out that the contributions section of the software won't let the treasurer input contributions by name. The software requires an envelope number. This would require the congregation to either start using a numbered envelope system or create 'dummy' envelope numbers and assign them to members and visitors. Either alternative will be a lot of work.

The move to a SAAS product may magnify the importance of this consideration. As a group, web-based software is not generally as 'customizable' as more traditional solutions, so making sure that the culture modeled by the software is compatible with your own is very important. However, if you want to change the way your congregation uses information and communicates with its community, a SAAS may be of great assistance. Just don't underestimate the impact of a change in culture and a change in software at the same time.

Technology infrastructure and economics

Many congregations have created a computer network, enabling staff and members to share documents and information. These networks range from the very simple to the very complex, and some can cost thousands of dollars each year to maintain. Medium to large-sized congregations typically have a large investment in computer hardware and software.

A traditional CMS product on a network is often the largest consumer of its computing power, storage and memory. Since access to a SAAS is through an internet browser, moving to a SAAS product may enable your congregation to simplify its network, use the same hardware longer and require less staff time for on-going maintenance. With a SAAS, updates to the software are available automatically. That means no individual loading of new software on each workstation. Since the congregation's data and all programs now reside on the SAAS provider's servers, there should be fewer network/CMS problems. A congregation's connection to the internet will become even more important, and the capacity of the connection may need to be increased.

Switching to a SAAS may have other economic implications. With traditional software, the congregation purchases a copy of the product, licenses to operate it on as many workstations as needed, and pays an annual support fee for maintenance and updates. With a SAAS, there is typically a conversion/startup fee plus a monthly fee for use. Your congregation does not 'own' the software. You are paying for access to the software each month. And just as costs vary widely for a traditional CMS, they do also for the new SAAS products. Opinion is split as to whether switching to a SAAS will save hardware, software and maintenance costs over the long term. Our advice is to not make the primary decision factor cost savings.

Longevity

Each year, new CMS providers enter the market. These days a higher percentage of new providers offer web-based solutions. Some new firms have sound financial backing,

heavy investment in product development and rapid growth. Assuming that on-going management is sound, these companies should be around for many years.

Other start-up companies have good ideas but don't have sufficient capacity to both bring these ideas to market and maintain their product for existing users. This doesn't mean your congregation shouldn't purchase a SAAS from a new company. Just be smart about the company itself as well as its product. Make sure there is a clear understanding of how and when your congregation's information would be returned to you if you choose to discontinue the relationship with a particular company or if the company itself would close. One congregation we know has negotiated with their SAAS provider to have a copy of the software source code kept by an attorney, sort of 'in escrow' as a safety precaution.

The price of change

Making the change from one traditional CMS to another traditional CMS or to a web-based SAAS can open up exciting new possibilities for ministry and effectiveness, but it will have a cost – in money and time. Congregations often underestimate both. If you are planning on a CMS change to a SAAS, consider:

1. Money for...

- setup fees

- ongoing support/maintenance

- data conversion

- training to be supplied by the vendor

- custom report writing

- additional internet connection capacity

2. Time spent by staff and volunteers with...

setup

process development

implementation

data conversion

training

re-training

internal support for the new software

Some of these costs may be offset by a reduction in staff time devoted to maintenance of the former system and future hardware purchases. And even though cost is an issue, don't make the decision to change based primarily on cost. Make the change because it is needed to support the congregation's culture and ministries.

Can we have it both ways?

So what should you do if you like your current traditional CMS but want to add some of the benefits of a web-based system? Some traditional CMS providers have begun to add web-based features. Two of the largest, ACS Technologies and Shelby Systems, both now offer web-based modules with increased connectivity to congregational websites and a renewed emphasis on outreach and assimilation. One of these products may offer the right balance to your congregation, but they will incur both the costs of traditional software as well as added expense for web features.

So what should we do?

Our advice to congregations remains the same – match the features of the software to the culture and ministries of your congregation, within the congregation’s financial constraints. There are now just more options. Additional helps for choosing and using congregational management software can be found at www.centerforcongregations.org.

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