

Airports site evolves, grows with Decoupled Delivery

Airports Council International-North America is the leading business association for U.S. and Canadian airports, with 243 operator members that enplane nearly all airline traffic in North America. Nearly 400 aviation-related businesses are also members of the association.

From its offices in Washington, D.C., ACI-NA's 34 employees provide a variety of association membership services, including disseminating issue information, representing airports in public forums and organizing conferences.

Classic vendor lock-in

As with all business associations, professional associations and other cause-promoting organizations, publishing issue information is critical to ACI-NA's mission. But five years after ACI-NA announced the launch of its then-current site, the association had outgrown its Web design firm's custom-built content management system. The staff was experiencing bottlenecks getting content online, and the site was becoming stale.

"When I came into this job, we had a content management system that was extremely rigid," says Web development manager Will Huthnance. The ACI-NA site needed to evolve continually to maintain the association's leadership role in a highly competitive information marketplace, but in a classic case of vendor lock-in, the system was stuck in the past. The proprietary legacy product was able to handle only the parts of the site envisioned when it was built; only the Web design firm could customize it.

"It required quite expensive programming for us to expand or put new content onto the Web site," Huthnance says. As a result, he found himself increasingly going around the system. He created static pages for the home page and new parts of the site, which staff members then were dependent on him to update.

At the same time, performance and usability issues were hampering staff members' efforts to update the sections still connected to the content management system. "Our CMS was very clunky and very un-user-friendly," Huthnance says. "To use a Windows analogy: It was like Windows 95 versus XP." Users found the system slow to respond. Periodically it would crash, with users losing recent edits. File management was awkward and inefficient, and searching for files was difficult. When users mistakenly deleted an item, there was no undo option, and there was no ability to preview content in a browser before publishing it to the public site. Staff members were reluctant to use the system or avoided it altogether. "They resented the software," Huthnance says.

'Plone came through'

Eventually it became clear it was time to redevelop the site. With so many content management systems becoming accessible to smaller organizations since the previous ACI-NA site launch, Huthnance began evaluating the options, with an eye toward ease of use. "Plone came through on that front," he says. "You want to enable your staff to have the resources that enable them to do their jobs very efficiently and effectively. And Plone does that."

The association also began evaluating vendors, issuing a request for proposals that named the ability to manage its own site independently as a key goal. The request specified that the site use nonproprietary code so ACI-NA would be free to use other developers in the future. Perhaps more importantly, the request specified that the system be highly customizable, so ACI-NA staff could create new kinds of pages in-house.

The process led ACI-NA to Enfold Systems, with its unrivaled expertise implementing enterprise-grade Plone systems for nonprofit-sector clients. And because of that expertise, Huthnance says that when he saw what technology Enfold was proposing to use, "I was kind of shocked." The Decoupled Delivery architecture uses Enfold's professionally supported Plone distribution, Enfold Server, with an add-on product that deploys content to a separate public Web site. This independent "front-end" site is based on the PHP Zend Framework and Smarty page templates, popular Web technologies that give ACI-NA access to help from a large pool of Web developers, without needing to modify the more complex, powerful Plone application.

'Developers everywhere'

The site launched on-time and on-budget, and Huthnance says he's hearing good things. Management is happy to have a modern-looking, informative Web site that serves both members and the public; the site even has begun bringing in advertising revenue. And staff members have found the new system easy to learn, with intuitive navigation and quick system response. "It was easy for them to acquire the skills to update content," he says. "They can be productive straight off the bat."

Huthnance has been empowered to keep the site evolving, easily making such changes as adding to navigation menus, integrating forums and tweaking page styles. "I'm going in and doing stuff all the time," he says. And while some planned future functionality still will require turning to a vendor for programming, ACI-NA now has many options. As Huthnance notes, "There are PHP developers everywhere."



Overview



Business need: The Airports Council International-North America (ACI-NA) Web site was heavily focused toward member airports and aviation businesses. But in today's highly competitive information environment, ACI-NA needed to reorient its site with more content aimed at educating the general public.

Solution: Decoupled Delivery provides content management via Enfold Server, the professionally supported distribution of Plone; content conversion via the open-source Entransit product; and an independent, flexible, easy-to-customize "front end" based on the PHP Zend Framework and Smarty page templates.

Benefits: ACI-NA has become a user-friendly resource for all visitors seeking information about airports and the aviation industry, while in-house staff have been empowered to keep the site growing with the organization's continually evolving needs.

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Will Huthnance
Web Development Senior Manager
Airports Council International - North America

For more information

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