



Joomla for Nonprofits

Is the popular open-source solution to create and edit website content for non-technical users right for you?

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If your organization plans to launch or redesign a website in the near future, chances are that Joomla will be part of the discussion. With over 10 million downloads worldwide, Joomla is one of the most popular open-source content management systems (CMS) out there today. Clients using Joomla include MTV, Al Gore, the United Nations, and Citibank. Third-party extensions add the capability for integrating email lists, fundraising, multimedia, social networking, and blogging into your website using Joomla.



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Joomla is attractive to many nonprofits due to its ease of use and low cost to implement (the software itself is free). But is it right for you?

Why Use a CMS?

Joomla is one of several free, open-source content management system software packages currently available. Like every technology, Joomla is extremely well-suited for some tasks and less well-suited for others. Before going further, let's get acquainted with the basic concept of a CMS.

Is the content on the front page of your website more than six months old? Have you ever sent out a mailing that reached some recipients after the events on the calendar already happened? Every nonprofit knows the importance of timely communications, yet for many organizations this is an ongoing challenge.

Until about two years ago, there simply was no easy, cost-effective way for non-technical users to update their own site content. Clients either had to train existing staff to code HTML, purchase additional software, hire a webmaster, or contract for ongoing maintenance. Installing individual desktop software was especially cumbersome for organizations functioning outside the traditional office environment — a description that fits many nonprofits, which often rely on volunteers, part-time staff, and staff who work from home.

CMS technologies such as Joomla enable authorized staff members and volunteers to edit their own site content from a web-based interface, with no prior knowledge of HTML or programming. CMS users can create new menu items and web pages, add news and calendar listings, upload photos and videos, and even build online communities.

"We knew nothing about web development. I've become a huge fan of Joomla," says Lynda Graham, of Sutton, Quebec, who built her village's nonprofit tourism website, www.infosutton.com, with the help of an initial consultant. Now she and three other volunteers are able to update the site's event and restaurant listings weekly, at no additional expense.

Interactive Knowledge, of Charlotte, NC, specializes in building multimedia websites for documentary films, cultural institutions, and nonprofits. President Tim Songer notes that clients such as the Duke Endowment are now specifically requesting the Joomla platform for their websites. He believes a CMS offers great advantages for both web developer and client.

"Customers want to have control over the website after it's launched. Before, every time they wanted a change they would have to sign a change order. We'd rather have the customer make the change," Songer explains.

Why Joomla?

If you talk to Joomla enthusiasts, "ease of use" is the phrase you will hear again and again. While there is no one-size-fits-all CMS solution, Joomla is attractive because it offers the flexibility to develop a full-featured website, but is still accessible to non-programmers. There is also a large and active volunteer support community, <http://community.joomla.org/>, that welcomes first-time users.

"It's relatively easy to install and use for the beginner. For the advanced power user, it's very flexible. For the in-between, there's a lot of plug-ins that give you functionality that you don't have to build yourself," says Dave Conlin, lead technologist at Interactive Knowledge.

Joomla is known for the large number of third-party extensions developed specifically for the platform. Nonprofits can enable secure online donations and allow people to join their online mailing lists. They may also wish to consider integration with CiviCRM, an open-source system for tracking donors, events, and mailings.

"That's the beauty of Joomla," says Tamar Schanfeld, who specializes in building sites for synagogues at www.shofarsites.com, a division of web development firm TnR Global. "You don't have a programmer to do Joomla site in-house. You do need someone technical."

When Not to Use Joomla

If all you need is blogging functionality, WordPress is probably sufficient. For extremely complex or high-traffic sites, Drupal and Plone may provide performance advantages, and also currently offer greater flexibility in assigning roles and responsibilities (see "Roles and Responsibilities," below). For a brand-new website, a Joomla site costs about the same as the equivalent HTML site, and will yield maintenance savings down the line. If you are converting an existing site to Joomla, however, areas such as database migration, dynamic content, and custom multimedia applications may all require additional programming time. Be sure to work with a consultant or developer early in the planning process and get detailed specifications and price estimates for the work involved.

Planning Your Joomla Site

As with any communications project, think about your goals for the website — what is your message and who is your audience? You will find it helpful to develop a written site plan. This should include an outline of site content, project timeline, and the process to be used for updating and maintaining the site after it goes live. Whether or you are building the site in-house or working with an outside contractor, be sure that one person on your staff has responsibility for the project.

Branding and Layout

To the casual viewer, a Joomla site is indistinguishable from a standard HTML website; to be honest, many Joomla sites look a whole lot better. The visual possibilities are almost infinite. Download an existing Joomla design template, or create your custom CSS template, adding your own logo and branding to give your site a distinctive look and feel. Numerous page layouts are possible, and different layouts and style templates can be combined within the same site. Most web designers will present you with multiple design choices. Be sure that your chosen design is easy to navigate and reflects your organization's message and personality.

Roles and Responsibilities

Once your site goes live, who will be able to update what? How will you coordinate changes? Defining this process represents one of the biggest challenges for an organization moving to a model where multiple users can update content.

It is also an area where nonprofits may find Joomla 1.5 functionality to be some what lacking. Currently, Joomla supports several preset roles (Super-Administrator, Administrator, Manager, Author, Editor, and Publisher) that allow different level of access to site content and administrative functions. However, as of July 2009, Joomla does not allow organizations to create user groups or customize which functions or content areas the various roles can access. Last month's 1.6 alpha release includes improved ACL (Access Control List) functions to meet this need. The production release of Joomla 1.6 is expected in late 2009.

Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

In order to help Google and other search engine crawlers find your content and assign it a high ranking, be sure to select "Search Engine Friendly URL's" under SEO Settings, which are accessed by clicking Global Configuration on the main control panel. Joomla pages generally have unique titles and include more structured content than those coded by hand, which also help your search engine ranking. Other quick SEO tips: Use headings to divide up content within pages, add "alt" tags and captions to images, and link your site to other lists of resources and directories.

Accessibility

As with SEO, the structured nature of pages generated by a content management system confers an immediate

accessibility advantage. In addition, Joomla web design moves away from tables and toward a CSS and "div"-based layout, a major goal for site accessibility. Developers can build custom templates to further enhance accessibility in accordance with WCAG (Web Content and Accessibility Guidelines) standards and client goals.

Security

The tasks here are similar to those performed by webmasters for any type of site. Choose a reputable hosting company. Stay up-to-date on the version of Joomla you are using, use [captchas](#) on forms, and research third-party components before installing them. Because Joomla content is stored in a database, not in individual files, it is especially important to make regular backups. Create an automated backup process and practice restoring from backup early in the site-development process. For Joomla-specific security advice and best practices, visit the [Joomla Security Checklist](#).

The Advantage for Nonprofits

Communicating news and events is essential to fundraising and volunteer recruitment, yet nonprofits work with marketing budgets a fraction of the size of those in the private sector. Today, most nonprofit organizations have a website, but many do not leverage it to the greatest extent possible.

Technologies such as Joomla work well with existing communications methods such as newsletters and email campaigns. They allow you to repurpose existing content at no additional cost — and with very little additional outlay of time.

The open-source movement was founded by idealists and is sustained by the same spirit today. Their vision complements the goals and philosophy of the nonprofit world. Joomla empowers organizations to take full ownership of their web presence, sharing their goals and achievements with a wider audience.

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