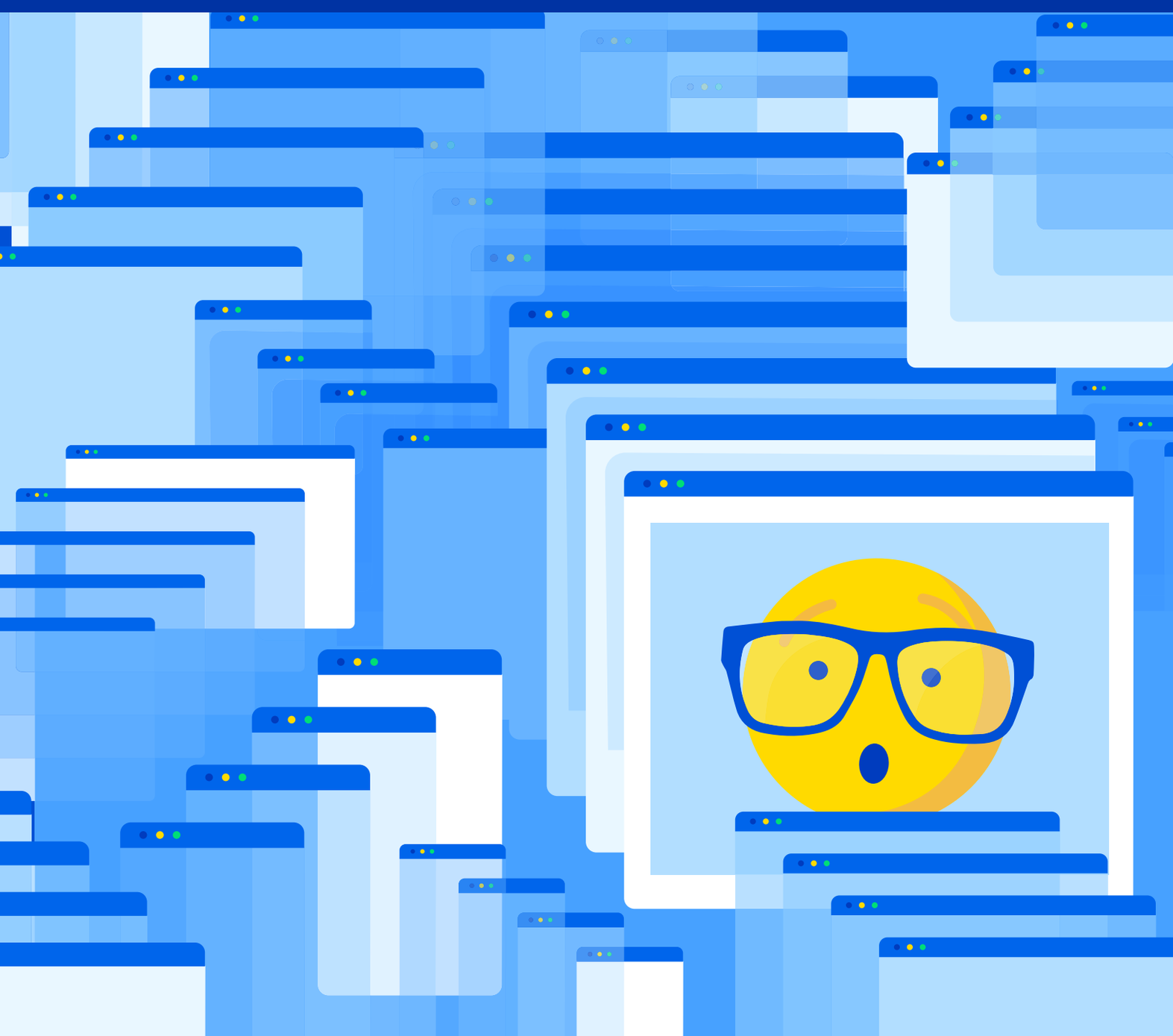
contentful

Is digital sprawl diluting your brand?

How to turn a content mess into your greatest asset



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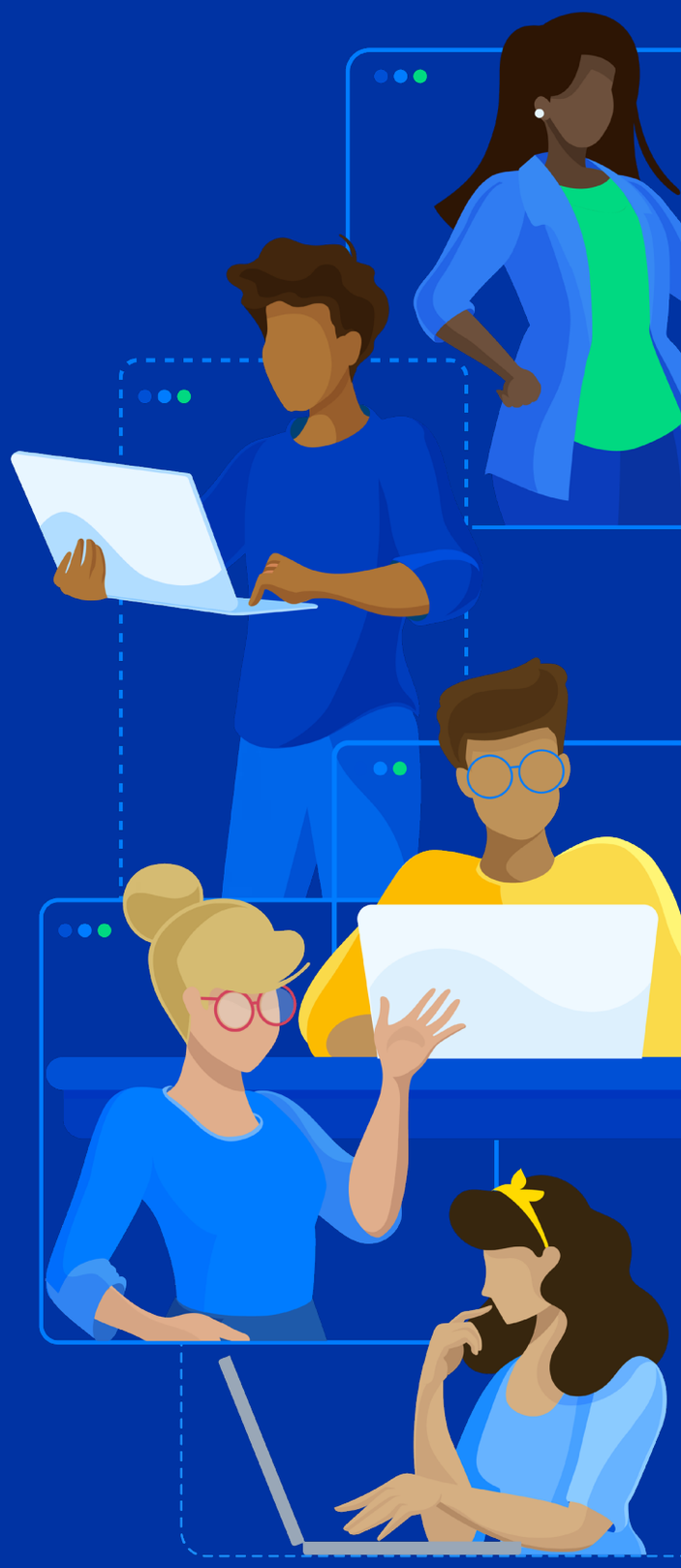


INTRODUCTION

Disconnected systems slow enterprises down and make it hard for them to deliver omnichannel digital experiences at scale.

The myriad of platforms and tools that underpinned brands' success with early digital products and experiences have come back to haunt them in the form of digital sprawl.

> We're at a tipping point. Adding new CMSes and tools to serce each new channel is no longer a viable strategy.

When digital portfolios started expanding beyond a single website, to include multiple sites, ecommerce, mobile apps, etc., we didn't know how many channels would ultimately be included. It made sense to add the tools we needed for each new channel. This worked well when it was just a handful of channels, but it hasn't scaled well for enterprises that now manage hundreds of sites, products and experiences across different channels and locales. It's not just more sites to manage, it's more content and more versions of each piece of content as consumers expect localized, personalized content throughoutthe customer lifecycle.

Multiple teams – marketing, customer success, sales, HR, recruiting – generate and distribute content that collectively defines the brand and contributes to the customer experience. When these experiences aren't built on an integrated content platform, teams end up trying to cobble together connected customer experiences from a fragmented backend. Cutting and pasting content into personalization tools, manually synchronizing content across channels, and maintaining bolt-ons and workarounds are stretching teams and legacy systems to the breaking point.

This takes time away from the creativity needed to build and deliver future digital experiences. Enterprises that rely on a sprawl of legacy systems are at a disadvantage; digital natives are disrupting entire industries by building pipelines that deliver better digital experiences at scale. Without being weighed down by the legacy of disconnected tools, these competitors can choose modern tools built for the current digital ecosystem.

To compete, enterprises need to adopt modern platforms that can connect with a broad range of systems and components and facilitate the flow and management of large volumes of content and data. These extensible, API-first platforms empower organizations to build custom tech stacks.

These unified layers provide consistency – a single source of truth for all the different versions of content that marketing, sales, customer success and other teams use. What's more, they integrate with your preferred tools for localization, personalization, translation, optimization, etc. to streamline these processes.

In this paper, we'll discuss why closed, monolithic systems have led to digital sprawl, and why continuing to use these legacy systems is unsustainable. We'll talk about the impact of diverse content on digital customer experiences, and then we'll take a deeper dive into the next generation of API-first tools that are helping digital leaders transition from siloed legacy systems to an integrated ecosystem of tools that offer the flexibility and agility you need to deliver omnichannel digital experiences at scale.

How legacy systems led to digital sprawl

In the early days of digital, projects and initiatives happened organically at the team level. Individual teams chose software and services that met their specific needs. Since the projects themselves were separate, there was little need to think about how all these platforms would integrate. This autonomy enabled teams to move fast, but it left a legacy of disconnected systems and processes.

As the digital landscape expanded, teams found themselves with CMSes, data systems and other tools that weren't built to work together. In large organizations, different teams – content creation, sales, SEO, customer service – were using different tools making it impossible to collaborate effectively. There were silos within silos. As more channels and digital products emerged, so did more silos, with various teams responsible for different products, channels and content repositories.

Vendors tried to address these silos by wrapping common functions together into suites, but these were far too restrictive to meet the needs and preferences of teams organization-wide. Mega-suites have failed to stop the sprawl. Even small companies are using dozens of different apps, and large organizations reported having more than 200 apps across different departments, according to Blissfully's 2019 Annual SaaS Trends report.

Mark Demeny, an expert in CMSes and related digital applications, lays out the challenge of digital sprawl mathematically. "Digital started with one channel, one message. Now we have multiple channels (web, mobile, voice, email, IoT) and the complexity of different messaging and personas. Marketers have to deal with responsibility and KPIs for multiple channels. What was one to the power of three (13) is now eight to the power of three (83). That's 64 times the complexity."

> This explosion of content (and the tools to organize, personalize, localize, optimize and deliver it) is a driving force behind digital sprawl. It's time to rein it in.

Digital sprawl is not sustainable

Legacy systems helped organizations build their digital portfolios, but the silos they created are a growing technical and organizational problem.

Developer resources are tied up in maintaining cumbersome systems and the tenuous connections between them. Even minor changes require developer support because the systems are too complex and fragile for content creators to mess with. Customer data is trapped in silos and spread across different repositories, making personalization impossible.

We've seen an exponential increase in both the amount of content companies need to manage and the time spent in content operations. To maximize the value of your content, it needs to be localized, personalized, synchronized across channels and updated regularly. Manually managing these tasks across a sprawl of disconnected systems requires a huge commitment of human resources. Different systems often have different capabilities, including how well they integrate with personalization and other tools. Filling these gaps with manual processes makes it hard to scale.

The more content you produce, the more time someone — often your editor and developer — needs to spend managing it.

This takes resources away from other business initiatives and makes scalability dependent on hiring and training more people.

"The problems with scaling in legacy CMS are manifold," Demeny explains. "Newer channels are harder to add – often adding a 'headless' mode is a separate content area. Site workflow, governance and permissions are often much more difficult to manage in legacy. They were designed to add management layers on top of simple web servers and don't take into account functionality provided by cloud services. Lastly, your published site is a single codebase, which makes it hard to manage multiple agencies or projects without stepping on toes."

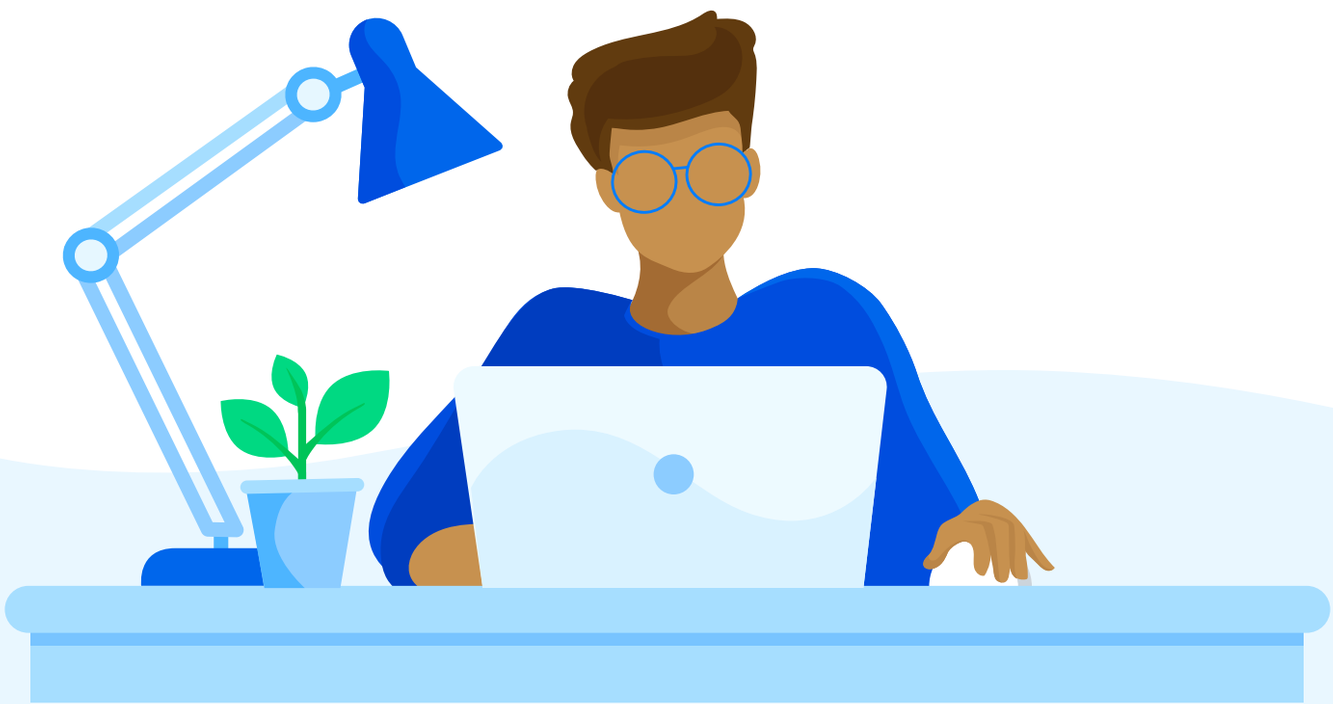
Legacy systems make it hard for people to do their jobs well

Disconnected systems make it hard for teams to collaborate, and rely on error-prone manual processes to keep everything in sync.

Consumers are constantly hit with the resulting failures in delivering satisfying customer experiences. One high-end home goods and furnishings store sent three different offers via their email, web and mobile apps. Imagine their customers' frustration when none of them were honored in-store. In another example, 47% of insurers couldn't give consistent answers across different channels.

We tend to focus on how these mistakes affect customers and the bottom line, but they also frustrate the teams responsible. People become dissatisfied when they don't have the systems and process in place to do their jobs well. Content and creative teams are bogged down in management, developers have tons of technical debt, and everyone is trying to move faster while struggling with slow-moving architecture. Teams that should be collaborating toward organizational goals are fighting for resources and pointing fingers when things go wrong.

What's more, companies risk losing top talent to competitors who have already built modern tech stacks. Why work with systems that leave you prone to embarrassing mistakes, when you can use tools that empower you to build award-winning customer experiences?



How digital sprawl impacts customer experience

Marketing, sales, customer service, human resources and even customers themselves are distributing content. All of this content contributes to the customer experience, but it happens outside the scope of any one team. This can leave the overall customer experience without a definitive owner.

Mark uses the example of a coffee shop to illustrate the sprawl of content that organizations need to think about. There are ads on billboards, Instagram pictures, social media posts, user reviews and campaigns that need to be localized (e.g., for the seasonal demand for pumpkin spice in North America). Then there is the content on the website and in the mobile app that needs to match in-store signage and the labels on coffee cups. Even the way the baristas greet customers and make upsells is part of the experience.

These separate touchpoints are all part of the same customer journey, and research shows the sum is greater than its parts.

"Cross-industry research has demonstrated that journeys – or the customer's end-to-end experience of buying a product or service – tend to predict overall satisfaction much more accurately than customer satisfaction with individual touchpoints. In fact, the end-to-end customer-experience metric predicts overall satisfaction and willingness to recommend twice as accurately as touchpoints do," McKinsey & Company states.

Who owns CX?

Not so long ago, a marketing or marketing-communications team would be responsible for external messaging and set the tone for the customer experience. It was easier to maintain consistent messaging because fewer teams were producing customer-facing content. Now it seems like everyone is pushing out content and jockeying for control of the customer experience.

> "Only 16% of marketers say that marketing takes total ownership of CX. Mainly, it's other departments driving it — particularly sales (65%) and customer services (54%)."
>
> OmoBono
> "What Works Where 2018"

The content that defines a brand has sprawled beyond the scope of marketing. This is part of the challenge for legacy systems. A platform built for marketing is unlikely to be the best platform for human resources, sales or customer service.

In addition to the challenge of how to deliver connected customer experiences, marketing teams are facing increased expectations on other fronts.

"As marketers and content teams, our expanded realm is getting bigger and bigger by the day. We're expected to know things about context, biometrics, language, personalization..." Cathy McKnight explains in "Getting the Most Out of Your Content Stack," her presentation at the Intelligent Content Conference 2018.

Marketers are expected to integrate new technology, manage campaigns across every channel and process massive amounts of data to personalize offers and respond fast to market changes and opportunities.

All while worrying that their carefully crafted messaging might be out of sync with something that sales, customer service or HR is doing.

"I wouldn't say that marketing has to own customer experience, but somebody does – that's the key. Otherwise it becomes a mess," Demeny says. He notes that well-known brands have roles such as a VP of brand who can unify messaging across teams. In his book *The Content Pool*, author Alan J. Porter makes the case for a chief content officer who can take a holistic view of content across the organization and manage it as a strategic asset.

Unified content management to improve CX across channels

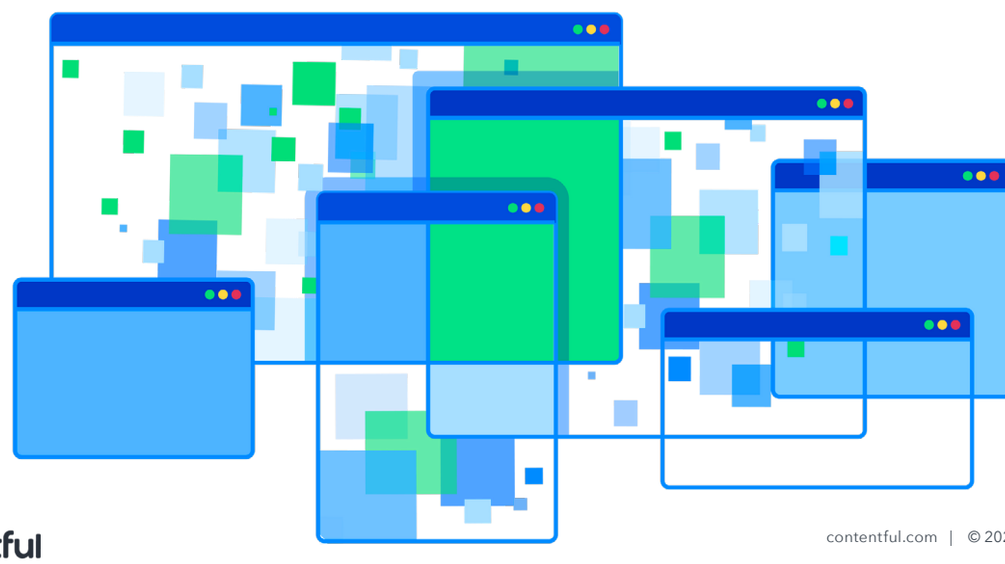
When we think about content as a strategic asset belonging to the organization – not individual teams – we can see how a unified content management strategy makes sense.

An enterprise-wide content strategy can unify brand voice, reduce redundant work and maximize the reach and value of each piece of content.

Improving the management and flow of content frees up resources and gets products to market faster – a win for the whole organization. The challenge is to unify content without forcing teams to conform to rigid workflows and templates.

A unified content management strategy should facilitate collaboration and implement consistent governance while giving teams the autonomy to thrive in their respective areas.

A new generation of solutions is needed to manage this complex interplay between organizational goals and the needs and preferences of individual teams. “The better CMS adapts to the style of each individual operator while maintaining data and goal integrity between the entire team. Functionally speaking, that means two CMS operators can utilize the same CMS to accomplish mutual or separate goals, while arriving at those goals with different thought processes. CMSes that are modular with tags and APIs stand ahead of others,” David Roe writes in CMSWire.



A new generation of solutions

Instead of trying (and failing) to meet every business need, the new generation of solutions takes a different approach. They focus on doing one business function well and integrating with a broad range of tools to form a tech stack. For example, Contentful provides a content layer that can integrate with editorial tools, developer tools, HR, sales, ecommerce, etc. This App Framework creates connective tissue between the silos, facilitating the flow of content and data without dictating how it will be used.

> "Contentful helps organizations work across silos. We're not trying to solve all the problems, we're providing a flexible base that makes it easier to think about strategy and work in a more agile way."
>
> Mark Demeny
> Content Management Systems Expert

Instead of a limited number of prefered partners, API-first platforms like Contentful empower users to integrate with the tools they prefer. "When developers and marketers can use the tools they want, it increases the odds of success," Demeny says.

The magic happens through APIs that enable these new platforms to connect with other tools in your tech stack and deliver to any digital endpoint. Teams can collaborate on a shared strategy and then work in parallel using their preferred tools and workflows to deliver the individual components.

For example, Optimizely wanted to decrease content build times and increase extensibility. Their marketing team used to be dependent on the engineering team to implement any changes to the website, no matter how small, resulting in slow-moving projects with a lot of wasted hours. After the head of Optimiely's front-end development team chose to migrate their content over to Contentful, marketers were empowered to make their own content changes without wasting developer time.

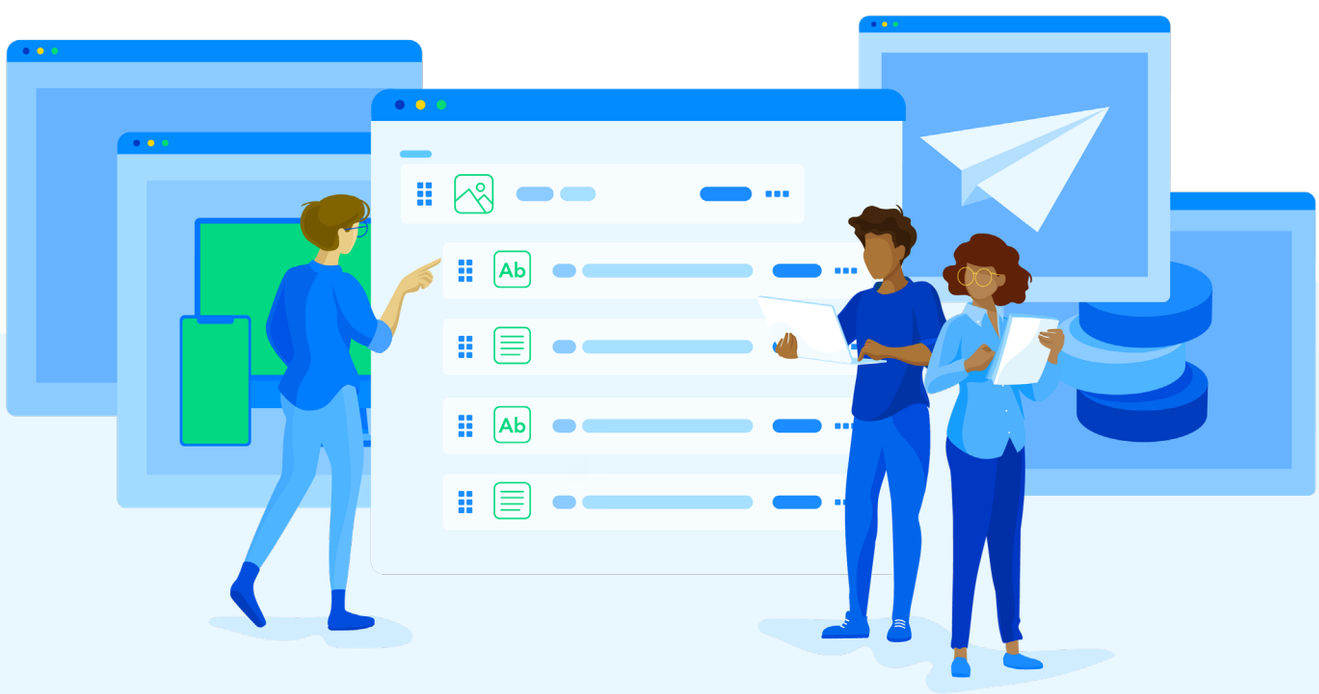
Now, diverse teams including demand generation, sales, events, reduction marketing and more all have the power to build better content, while still using the tools they love.

Streamline operations to deliver better CX

Unifying siloed information enables organizations to implement governance, workflows and permissions on a global scale. This aligns teams, improves brand consistency and makes it easier to deliver a connected customer experience. Teams that need content or data can easily locate it and use it without the extra work of copying and pasting. What's more, API-first platforms are extensible. New products, channels and technology can be added without the integration challenges experienced on legacy platforms.

By leveraging existing content, data and workflows, teams can get new products to market faster – without creating new silos.

A shared content layer makes it much easier for organizations to personalize and localize content, while keeping the message consistent. For example, editors can create content directly in Contentful's editorial app and pull in content from other sources, such as legacy systems that they are not ready to replace. Once in the unified hub, that content can be personalized, translated for local markets and delivered to email, websites, mobile apps, social media, digital billboards, etc. Even though the content is widely distributed, it's still pulling from a single source of truth. This ensures that special offers, new brand elements, and content updates are in sync and that personalization, localization and other features are applied consistently.



Agility and scale

This new generation of API-first tools, also helps organizations be more agile and scale faster. Scott Brinker coined the term "Martec's Law" to describe how marketers will always feel behind because technology changes faster than organizations. Organizations can manage this challenge by choosing technology strategically, becoming more agile and "designing for change," Brinker explains.

"Strive to become a more agile organization to accelerate the rate at which you're able to absorb changes. Practices such as lean and agile marketing, as well as other software-inspired management techniques, can increase your company's metabolism," he writes. Adding, "By explicitly 'designing for change,' you can build a stack that facilitates new products and services being swapped in, while older ones can be gracefully sundowned and removed."

From a two-person startup to a NASDAQ-listed company with offices with offices in 13 cities around the world, Atlassian has grown quickly. With growth, however, comes concerns about scalability. As the company acquired more products and expanded into new markets, content to help customers gain value was crucial. Atlassian needed to support content for new platforms, experiences and solutions. The legacy systems that grew organically in the early years limited Atlassian's ability to solve these challenges in a scalable way.

"We recognize that shapeless content is hard to do intelligent things with," John Collins, Senior Content Designer at Atlassian says. More structured, modular content became more flexible content. "That's a major change for us as an organization. We really recognize that as powerful," Collins adds. Contentful helps Atlassian meet the challenge of getting teams to work together effectively with customizable features that facilitate collaboration.

Cloud-based API-first tools make it easy to scale your internal processes as your organization grows and teams become more distributed.

Everyone can be connected through the same content tools regardless of geographic location. Governance and permissions can be applied to new teams and fine-tuned to give agencies, translators and other collaborators access to just the content they need. This makes it easier to manage the growing sprawl of content with confidence.

Accelerate builds and reduce time to market

All of these benefits add up to more efficient workflows and reduced time to market. Adopting an agile, modern approach (using platforms like Contentful and AWS) enabled TELUS to dramatically improve their time to market. When the Apple iPhone X launched, the new architecture and processes helped TELUS beat the competition to market – it was the only company in Canada to offer the new phone 15 minutes following its release.

The team went from weeks to days for launching new products.

SumUp, a financial technology company, transformed their localization program by replacing inconsistent manual processes with localization at the click of a button. "By integrating with Contentful, we could ensure that no matter how complex the page was, with the push of a button, the content was translated and copied/pasted in all the languages without human interaction until it was ready to be published," Content Management and Localization Lead David Pillon says.

Now is the time to step toward the future

Leaders must make a decision: Do you continue with traditional systems and processes or step into the future with the next generation of API-first tools?

The old way of delivering digtial experiences isn't enough to keep up with today's demand. Loblaw Digital needed to accelerate production to deliver 150+ digital experiences in one year, Engineering Director Justin Watts in a Jamstack explains talk aptly titled "What got us here, won't get us there." That would not be possible using the same systems and processes they used to deliver nine experiences in the past seven years. They chose modern, API-first tools – including Contentful – to become faster and more agile.

CONCLUSION

No more ripping and replacing

Whether you are ready to leap ahead with an enterprise-wide change like Loblaw Digital or exploring CMSes for the first time, choosing API-first tools is a smart bet. With traditional CMSes, teams start accruing technical debt right out of the box with every bolt-on, workaround and manual process it takes to fit the CMS to their needs. Up-front investments can be high and much of that work is lost when the platform needs to be replaced. This is a drain on resources that could be invested in long-term revenue generation.

A modern content stack is built to continually evolve. Well-documented APIs enable organizations to swap out or add new components without breaking the whole thing. What's more, APIs can be used to streamline operational tasks such as moving content around, updating content models, managing workflows and governance. The integrations you make, apps you build and content you create can all be reused and iterated on to maximize the value of your work. Technical debt is minimized because you aren't working within rigid constraints and fighting with disconnected systems.

Teams spend less time managing the technology and more time using it to deliver products and experiences. Technology and content become building blocks that can be integrated in endless combinations using APIs instead of hard coding components together. This gives teams the flexibility to change components without reengineering the whole system. New products and experiences can be scaled up rapidly using the existing infrastructure without jeopardizing other parts of the system. This empowers organizations to move fast and deliver bold digital experiences that scale.

Learn how Contentful's API-first platform can accelerate your next digital project and position your organization to be a digital leader.

Start building