

Review: SDL Tridion R5 Web Content Management shines

R5 trumps other WCM software with outstanding usability, depth

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Not long ago, there was a general perception that enterprises needed one central system to manage all their business content -- the philosophy behind enterprise CMSes (content management systems) from Open Text, EMC Documentum, and others. For some businesses this strategy still has merit. But the complexity of melding records management, Web content management, digital asset management, and document management has many organizations questioning this one-size-fits-all approach.

That's why you see healthy growth in individual areas, especially WCM (Web content management), where SDL Tridion has strong credentials. Those outside of Europe may not know much of this company, headquartered in the Netherlands. But I see that quickly changing; during my evaluation, SDL Tridion R5 bettered other WCM offerings in most measurement categories.

R5's core Enterprise Content Services (based on Microsoft Windows .Net technology) lets you easily create, manage, and then deliver content to the Web, e-mail, RSS, and print. Importantly, Audience Manager helps you provide customized content based on users' interests. Additionally, you can use information from a CRM system directly in Audience Manager. Although R5 isn't as open as some pure J2EE-based solutions, SDL Tridion has portal and business connectors to bridge the gap. Moreover, the Presentation Server, which delivers Web content, runs on top of standard application servers, including IBM WebSphere and BEA WebLogic (as well as Microsoft Internet Information Server).



R5 greatly simplifies creating workflows, which are based on simple Microsoft Visio drawings.

Stake your site swiftly

SDL Tridion offers extensive out-of-the-box functions, most of which I tested for several weeks. This was more than enough time to create a Web site with workflows and personalized content, reuse content in separate multilingual sites, build several e-mail campaigns, and review various metric reports. SDL Tridion customers I contacted said their typical deployment of more complex sites was a very respectably eight to 12 weeks.

The relatively short build-out cycle is largely because SDL Tridion provides two browser-based interfaces: Content Manager Explorer and SiteEdit. These services run on a Windows server behind your firewall. I used Content Manager Explorer's rich text editor to enter and format a variety of content, including product specification sheets and press releases. Because SDL Tridion is based on XML, advanced users can also produce and edit content assets with authoring tools such as Altova XML Spy.

As with other .Net-based WCM solutions, such as Ektron CMS400.NET, SDL Tridion provides a convenient Windows Explorer-like view of content and display templates (XSLT [XSL Transformation] style sheets). If your editors are running a WebDAV-compliant desktop OS, they can open and save content directly from Microsoft Office applications or drag and drop content (images, PDF files, XML schemas) into SDL Tridion's repository using Windows Explorer.

SiteEdit offers an alternate way to maintain Web content. Less-experienced editors merely navigate to the appropriate Web page on your staging server and edit content in-place. This saves users from hunting around using Content Manager, while ensuring that only the master copy of a file is changed, which is especially important if pages or individual elements are reused in other parts of your site.

Simplicity is also very evident in the workflow engine. Using SDL Tridion's customized interface to Microsoft Visio, I placed graphical objects (that related to specific items in Content Manager) and connected them in the desired order. R5 then performed all the hard work, such as sending e-mails notifications to those in the approval chain. Workflow can get almost as

sophisticated as you want. For example, it's possible to route approved content to the external server of a vendor you use to translate text into different languages.

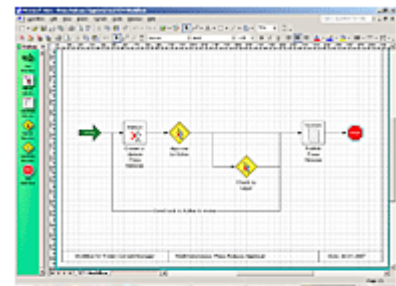
SDL Tridion's Content Delivery modules (which are J2EE based) show the same flexibility. Once pages were approved, I published them in various static forms, including HTML, JSP, ASP, and ASP.Net, to different Web servers. Alternately, R5 Dynamic Content Broker takes published content fragments and assembles Web pages at request time based on personalization settings or SQL queries. This gives you the choice of static pages for speed, while being able to deliver interactive pages when necessary.

Let's get personal

I was especially pleased with how SDL Tridion R5 handles personalization, which was very competitive with top-rated personalization products such as ATG Adaptive Scenario Engine. In my first test, R5's implicit profile management watched how anonymous visitors clicked through my site and then it generated content based on this behavior. For example, I created a section of my site for financial products. When the system noticed users clicking links in this area, I easily had a list of case history articles on my home page reordered so clients in the financial sector appeared at the top of the list.

Audience Manager let me create real-time connections with CRM systems (such as Siebel) and display content based on information stored in a customer database. Once users signed in, I presented a personalized micro site highly tailored to each person's interest.

The WebForms module is very helpful for both personalization and streamlining business processes. First, forms are easily designed by dragging and dropping predefined field types and saved directly to Content Manager. In that way, forms can be reused throughout your site. On the back end, collected information can be used right away to personalize pages, which can be submitted to other enterprise systems (this will admittedly take some help from your IT group), or used as part of other SDL Tridion processes. One such process is Outbound E-mail. This R5 module let me create customized e-mails based on each person's content interests. I had no trouble creating these e-mail templates using Adobe InDesign CS3 and reusing images that were previously published as part of Web sites.



Tridion includes many productivity features, including automatic notification to editors when content is updated.

The smell of success

Measuring the success of these campaigns -- and your overall Web presence -- is another task where SDL Tridion R5 excels. In the case of e-mail, built-in statistics showed whether visitors read e-mails. I then drilled down to view the click-through rate for each link in the e-mail. Moreover, R5's general Web analytics match up well to stand-alone products such as WebTrends and Omniture. For example, R5 overlays helpful statistics on each Web page about the popularity of content. When I spotted sections with little interest, the system's A/B testing feature helped me modify the message and verify if changes increased interest in various articles.

Beyond targeting content to different Web servers, R5 provides additional slants on scalability. One, called BluePrinting, let me share (ghost) content, layouts, and visitor profiles from a parent Web site to many other sites, which is essential in managing global sites that require some localization.

Using the graphical BluePrinting interface, I quickly created various country sites and language repositories. But what I liked the best was the how R5 handles most of the logic automatically. For instances, I had Canada English and French sites; the French site automatically displayed English content (based on content pulled from the U.S. English pages) whenever a local translated version was not available. What's more, when the original English content changed, an e-mail notification was sent to employees who managed the international sites so they could update their translated pages.

R5 includes basic content versioning. Still, I believe you should take a hard look at the optional Archive Manager. This module let me retrieve an archived Web page or an entire site for a specific date, time, or visitor profile. It's easy to configure the system to keep records for a certain time -- and schedule or manually remove content. Beyond keeping a site copy for historic needs, this system would also be very valuable for regulatory compliance or in legal liability cases where you might need to prove use of trademarks, say.

I have a hard time finding fault with SDL Tridion R5. It does just about everything I look for in a contemporary Web content manager. Content is easy to create and manage; you can then deliver it in multiple ways. Personalization is perhaps the hottest topic these days, and R5's audience targeting keeps up with the big names in this area. I was also impressed with the way BluePrinting handles global Web sites. If there's a slight weakness with SDL Tridion, it's connecting with other systems. But even here, the business and portal connectors, plus R5's XML architecture, should make integration with back-office systems possible without requiring a complex integration project.